SFX

SFX 30 YEARS

STAR WARS
MAKING SKELETON CREW

YELLOWJACKETS
THIRD COURSE IS SERVED

PETER PAN
THE POOHNIVERSE EXPANDS!

THE WITCHER
SIRENS OF THE DEEP

AGATHA ALL ALONG
DESIGNING WITCH WEAR

THE MONKEY
OSGOOD PERKINS RETURNS

THE GORGE
WHAT EVIL LURKS BELOW?

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

DAREDEVIL BORN AGAIN

RETURN OF THE HELL'S KITCHEN AVENGER

PLUS! HEART EYES | STRANGER THINGS | THUNDERBOLTS | DOCTOR WHO
INVINCIBLE | SABRINA THE TEENAGE WITCH | DOCTOR DOOM | HERCULOIDS

FUTURE
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FEATURES

22 DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN
Marvel's Man Without Fear lawyers up.

32 MARVEL UPCOMING
Why '25 will make true believers of us all.

40 THE WITCHER: SIRENS OF THE DEEP
Geralt gets animated in a new epic tale.

46 THE MONKEY
Osgood Perkins comes at the (Stephen) King.

50 SKELETON CREW
Discover the effects secrets of the *Star Wars* show.

60 PETER PAN'S NEVERLAND NIGHTMARE
To die will be an awfully messy adventure.

64 YELLOWJACKETS
Tonight we're gonna party like it's 1996.

RED ALERT

6 HEART EYES
A killer choice for a date night.

9 STRANGER THINGS
An Eddie Munson comic? Very Metal indeed!

10 CALL ME MASTER
Peoples of the universe, please attend carefully...

14 INVINCIBLE
Viltrumite makes right.

16 EMPEROR DOOM
We're Doomed... *Doomed*, we tell you!

REVIEWS

74 WOLF MAN
He's not alright noooooow.

76 DUNE: PROPHECY
The spiciest prequel of them all comes to telly.

80 STAR TREK: SECTION 31
Hey there, Georgiou girl...

86 DEATH OF THE AUTHOR
The only AI literature we actually endorse.

92 ABSOLUTE BATMAN
The Thicc Knight strikes again.

REGULARS

70 BROUGHT TO BOOK
We profile novelist Nnedi Okorafor.

91 THE WRITE STUFF
Olivie Blake is subjected to our author interrogation.

96 BLASTERMIND
This Captain America quiz is your patriotic duty.

98 TOTAL RECALL
Sketchy recollections of *Marianne Dreams*.

Captain's Log

Now that the holidays are behind us, we're well into my second favourite season of the year after Halloween – awards! As this issue goes to press, things have truly kicked off with the Golden Globes – always a precursor to the Academy Awards.

I adore Demi Moore – she's incredible in *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* and I genuinely love *Striptease* – so I was delighted about her Golden Globe win for *The Substance*. Staggering performance aside, it's also a huge win for the horror community, so often cruelly overlooked.

I mean, as much as I love *Wicked* and congratulate the team on their Cinematic and Box Office Achievement win, wasn't it *Terrifier 3* that was the world's most profitable film of 2024, making 45 times its budget? And what about Naomi Scott for *Smile 2*? But that's another reason to love Awards Season – the "discourse". Here's hoping *The Substance* activates another change, this time for genre cinema...

Meanwhile, we're less about red carpets and more about red leather this issue with the return of *Daredevil*, which I'm *very* excited about. Plus we look ahead to the Marvel-ous treats in store for the MCU and beyond. As ever, that's just a small part of what's in store in these pages as we try to respect the balance...

See you in four weeks!

Darren X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Over the moon that *SFX* has reached its 30th anniversary year. I remember buying issue one like it was yesterday. Excited for what the year has in store!
→ Loving rewatching *Blake's 7* with updated effects on Blu-ray.
→ I'm also doing a complete first-time watch of the '90s Spider-Man cartoon, on DVD of course. I had no idea it was an ongoing drama!
→ Marvel's *Alien* and *Predator* ranges are my favourite comics at the moment.

RANTS

→ Who cares how many years there are between *Batman* movies? We're still gonna watch 'em.
→ Also – why are people still gunning for films or shows that haven't even been released yet? Just don't watch 'em. Hate ages you, kids!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Loved *Evil Dead Rise*, so Lee Cronin seems like a really good choice to make the next version of *The Mummy*.
→ Delighted to see Tom Baker made an MBE. My only question is why he hasn't already been knighted.
→ Krypto the Super-Dog! Never much cared about Superman, but James Gunn's take on the Man of Steel looks a hell of a lot more fun than Zack Snyder's, doesn't it?
→ Demi Moore totally deserved to win a Golden Globe for her fearless performance in *The Substance*, and it's great that she did even though it's "just" a horror film.

RIP

→ Sad to hear about the death of *Doctor Who* writer Barbara Clegg. A rewatch of "Enlightenment" (cracking story) is in order.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Video Nasty* ticked so many boxes for me, such a fun series!
→ Can't wait for the next season of *Silo*!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ Finally, a 4K Blu-ray release of *Se7en*! It looks amazing in HDR, as you'd expect. What's in the booooox? *Quality*.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ I've waited a decade for Robert Eggers's *Nosferatu* and it didn't disappoint. Stunning visuals, an astonishing eye for detail and a deliciously dread-soaked atmosphere. The moody goth cousin to Coppola's *Dracula*.

RANTS

→ I reach for my blaster every time someone on *Skeleton Crew* says "At Attin". What a weirdly irritating name for a planet!

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *SFX* turns 30 years old! It's been an honour to write for the mag under three amazing editors since 2005. A last bastion of exceptional pop culture print journalism – thanks to every reader who keeps buying and supporting us!

THE FUTURE FIRST!

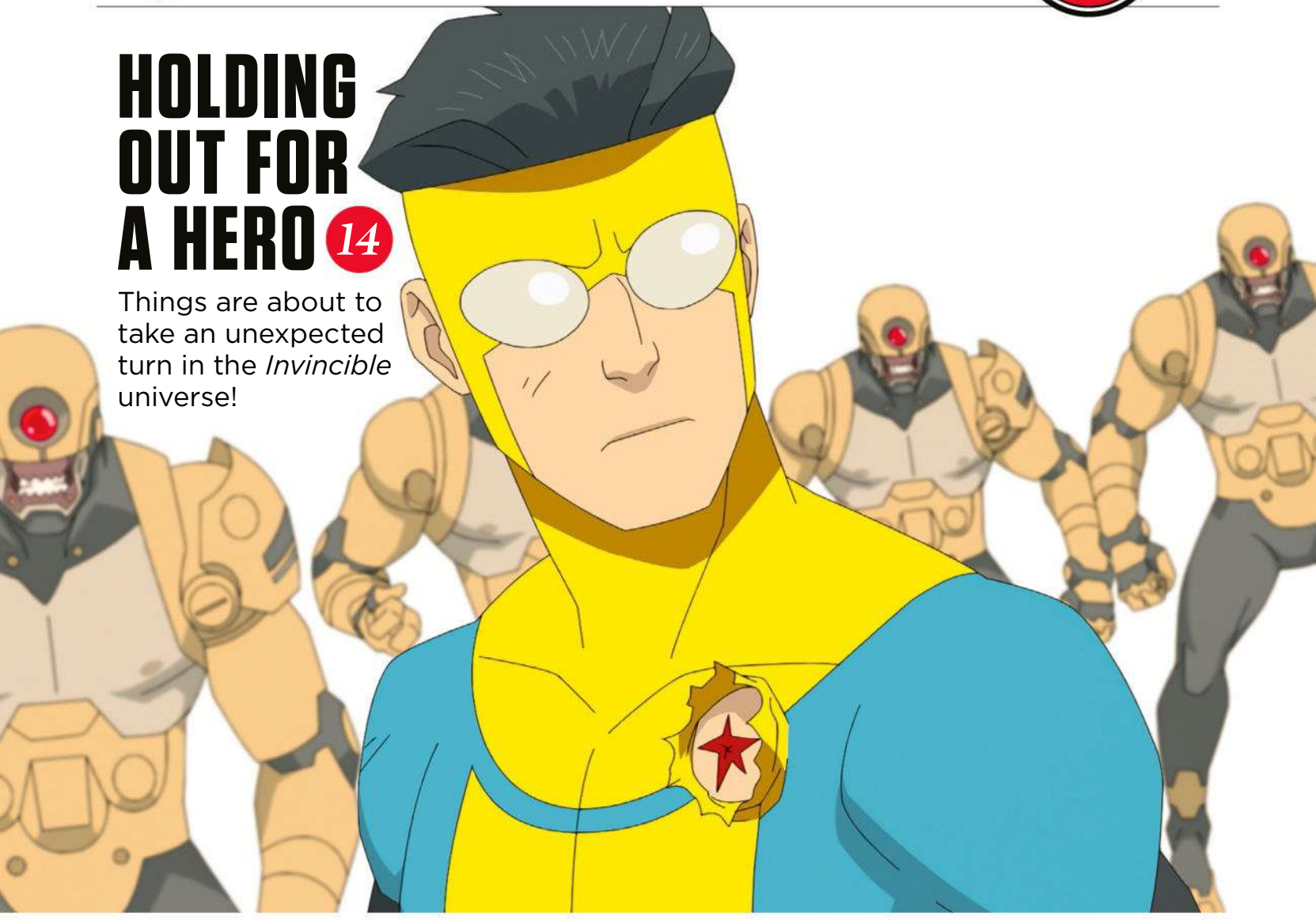
Red Alert

FEBRUARY 2025

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// BARKERS!

HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO 14

Things are about to take an unexpected turn in the *Invincible* universe!



Highlights

6
HEART EYES
→ It's about time we had a new slasher for Valentine's Day. Get those slow-walking couples, bestie!

10
DOCTOR WHO
→ Sacha Dhawan returns as the Master in an all new audio series from Big Finish.

16
DOCTOR DOOM
→ *One World Under Doom* is the name of the series, not just the current state of affairs.

Olivia Holt stars as Ally, about to get into trouble.

Heart Eyes himself clearly doesn't skip chest day.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Love Kills

Director Josh Ruben returns to the horror genre with the Valentine's Day bloodletting **Heart Eyes**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

JUST IN TIME FOR VALENTINE'S Day comes a cinematic mash-up that aims to please both romcom and horror fans. Impossible, you say? Director Josh Ruben most ardently disagrees and presents *Heart Eyes*, his latest film, as proof of concept.

In just five years, Ruben has carved out a unique horror space for himself making funny, thought-provoking and scary films like *Scare Me* (2020) and *Werewolves Within* (2021). His latest is based on an original premise by Phillip Murphy and co-written by successful modern horror screenwriters Christopher Landon and Michael Kennedy (*Happy Death Day*). Ruben was approached by Kennedy to give his spin on their tale of a masked serial killer (featuring literal heart eyes carved into his mask) targeting happy couples.

Ruben tells Red Alert that as soon as he finished the script, he couldn't get it out of his head because it gave him an opportunity to tap into a piece of himself that he hasn't been able to exploit yet on screen: his love of romcoms.

"This was an opportunity to make a Nora Ephron-esque romcom in earnest, that also slashes into Wes Craven horror," Ruben says of the script.

"I love that it's an original film, that it's not IP. I love that, regardless of the genre bending of it all and the Ephron of it all, it allows me to do what I've been wanting to do, which is to go nastier and to go bloodier and to go darker." Already adept at shifting tonal gears (as evidenced in his first two films), Ruben says he was still terrified to tackle a romantic comedy. "I'm asking myself, 'How the hell do you make a romantic comedy?' And the answer is, chemistry."

In most horror films, chemistry doesn't matter. Couples typically function as moving meat targets for the serial killer or as victims to torture even more heinously for their emotional connection or rampant horniness.

> This has one of those classic set-ups where there is a meet-cute and an initial attraction

The very definition of always seeing red.

However, *Heart Eyes* establishes its primary couple, played by Mason Gooding and Olivia Holt, as accidental victims that the audience root for.

"This has one of those classic set-ups where there is a meet-cute and an initial attraction," Ruben says of these two co-workers thrust together. "Olivia's character, Ally, realises that her job is at risk as this man might be coming in, potentially, to take her job because of a creative misstep she makes at work.

"Ultimately, they find themselves in a situation where, after being pitted against each other, they're chased together and have no choice but to team up, as reluctant as they are. Of course, as with every great romantic comedy or similar set-up, there are sparks.

"But it's in no way a farce," Ruben asserts. "They're playing it for real. At first at odds with each other, as they are terrified by this couple-killing maniac."

Unwilling to give too much away about the *Heart Eyes* killer, Ruben does say that when he was looking at the current horror landscape, he really had to go back in time to reference what he wanted to model the film around.

"For me, it was about asking, 'What haven't I seen in a while?'" he says. "I haven't seen a movie as fun and as violent as *Friday The 13th Part VI: Jason Lives*. Since we had a really awesome script, my goal was to make a movie that anyone would want to go to see other than myself. That's always the secret."

As for getting to craft his own horror icon in a mask, Ruben says he understood the weight of getting it right from the start. "I went into this imagining Heart Eyes as kind of a real-life, anti-hero, supervillain. So Chris Landon, the co-writer and my brilliant producer, said, 'You have to work with Tony Gardner', who's worked on everything from *Hocus Pocus* to this current iteration of Chucky, and one of my favourite horror superhero films of all time, *Darkman*.

"Tony and his team at [visual effects company] Alterian were just massively integral to this process," Ruben enthuses. "Gardner has made all kinds of iconographic characters. We just refined and refined and refined until we found something that had weight and texture and history to its look. You can almost kind of feel it, smell it. So then you have to ask, 'Why would a killer seek out to destroy romantic couples?'"

Ruben is excited to see how audiences respond to his latest experiment. "*Heart Eyes* is horror through and through. But if you can't stand horror, there's something for you in the romcom, for sure. And if you can't stand romcoms, boy, you're gonna love watching couples get massacred," he laughs.

Heart Eyes is in cinemas from 7 February.

SCI-FACT! **Ruben's *Werewolves Within* is a contemporary adaptation of the Ubisoft VR videogame of the same name, released in 2016.**

SCI-FACT! **1997's *Thunderbolts* issue one (by Kurt Busiek and Mark Bagley) revealed that they were actually the Masters of Evil in disguise.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Squad Goals

It's old vs new as Thunderbolts take on Doctor Doom in miniseries **Doomstrike**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AHEAD OF THEIR big-screen debut, the latest incarnation of Marvel's strike force team are set to meet their predecessors in new miniseries *Thunderbolts: Doomstrike*, which pits the Bucky Barnes-led current line-up against the original band of reformed super-criminals.

"The Thunderbolts are more than just a team – they're a legacy," says Jackson Lanzing, who is co-writing the five-parter with Collin Kelly for artist Tommaso Bianchi.

"Even though the cast has always rotated, it felt vital to us to return to some of those characters who have made such a huge impact – not just because they're fan favourites but because their stories are far from over. As for the clash between the teams, it's more than tension – it's explosive conflict!

"While the first team were villains turned heroes, Bucky's newest iteration are saboteurs and resistance fighters, out to bring down fascism itself."

"It's also naturally appealing to bring some of those landmark Thunderbolts back to the table after many years away," adds Kelly. "Especially as our last run was synergised so strongly with the upcoming MCU team. We really saw an opportunity here to do the opposite: to celebrate the entire legacy of the Thunderbolts across a broad, action-packed, morally grey canvas."

With Kelly noting "maybe letting Doom take all the credit for eliminating one of the world's most monstrous supervillains wasn't the best idea", ongoing crossover *One World Under Doom* spins out of 2023 *Thunderbolts* storyline Worldstrike, which inadvertently paved the way for the Latverian dictator to become Emperor of the World.

Cover art for issue one, by Leinil Francis Yu.

"Ultimately, it's a twist that makes for an incredible new story," continues Lanzing. "Bucky is not a man who seeks power or recognition, but the same can't be said for Victor von Doom. So now, out of his greatest triumph, Bucky is about to find himself in a worldwide nightmare of his own making as Doom twists the Thunderbolts legacy to fit his own eternal rule.

"The only hope he has is to assemble a new team of Thunderbolts to fight back. Every other hero on the planet is boxed in but Bucky and his friends are throwing themselves into the thresher and fighting with every last ounce of rebellion in them.

"Like the Ultimates for the core Marvel Universe, these are superheroes as insurgents and revolutionaries, putting their own blood on the line for the freedom of all."

Unfortunately, several of Bucky's most recent teammates are conspicuous by their absence. "That just leaves Bucky alongside Black Widow – with whom Bucky has reignited a deep, abiding romance – and Val, the Life Model Decoy that acts as his right hand at Thunderbolts Mountain," explains Lanzing.

"We're leaving the new line-up a surprise because there are so many insane new additions to the squad that we can't even believe we got to use," he teases.

Thunderbolts: Doomstrike issue one is out on 18 February.

SCI-FACT! **Writer Jody Houser was inspired by William Sleator's novels and the 1985 Disney film *Return To Oz*.**

HAWKINS, INDIANA, 1985.
THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. THE FALL AIR STEEPED WITH POTENTIAL AND PROMISE.
IN MANY WAYS, HAWKINS HIGH ISN'T ALL THAT DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER HIGH SCHOOL.
THERE ARE THE STUDENTS WHO SEE IT AS AN INSTITUTION OF KNOWLEDGE, HELPING THEM TO SHAPE THEIR FUTURE.
THERE ARE THOSE WHO SEE IT AS THE BEST YEARS OF THEIR LIVES. THEIR MOMENT IN THE SUN.
AND FOR SOME KIDS...IT'S JUST HELL.
EDDIE MUNSON MAY FALL INTO THE LAST CATEGORY...
...BUT HE'S CHOSEN TO EMBRACE IT.
WHY THE HELL ARE YOU IN SUCH A GOOD MOOD?
NOT SUPPOSED TO SAMPLE YOUR OWN PRODUCT, MAN.
BECAUSE IT'S MY LAST FIRST DAY EVER, MY FRIENDS.
PRETTY SURE YOU SAID THE SAME THING LAST YEAR, EDDIE.
AND THE YEAR BEFORE THAT.
DOUG AND JEFF...OH YE OF LITTLE FAITH.
I'M FINALLY GONNA DO IT BOYS. THIS IS THE YEAR I GRADUATE OUT OF THIS HELLHOLE.
DEFINITELY SAMPLING HIS STASH.
HMMM... THINK
MAYBE YOU NEED YOUR EYES CHECKED AGAIN, DWEEB. SO YOU DON'T DUMP INTO YOUR BETTERS.
TELL ME YOU'RE SORRY, MAKE ME BELIEVE YOU MEAN IT.
S-SORRY...
GET OUT OF MY SIGHT, FREAK.
NEW YEAR, SAME BULLSHIT.
SAME BULLSHIT INDEED.
IT WAS A PARTICULAR VARIETY THAT EACH OF THEM KNEW FAR TOO WELL.

Interior pages from *The Rise Of Hellfire*. Like, dude!

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Dungeon Master

Eddie Munson rocks out in Dark Horse's second **Stranger Things And Dungeons & Dragons** series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

EDDIE MUNSON, A FAN OF THE tabletop roleplaying game, is the star of Dark Horse Comics' second *Stranger Things And Dungeons & Dragons* crossover. Written by Jody Houser and Eric Campbell and illustrated by Diego Galindo, *The Rise Of Hellfire* charts the origins of the Hawkins High after-school club.

"The Hellfire Club is a central element in season four and Eddie, with his unique charisma and personality, has become one of the most iconic characters in *Stranger Things*, so creating this miniseries was only a matter of time," says Galindo. "Although it has a connection to the first comic series, this project is completely independent as it focuses on delving into Eddie's character and exploring his motivations and development."

Apart from Eddie's on-screen appearances, *The Rise Of Hellfire* also draws on Caitlin Schneiderhan's novel *Flight Of Icarus*, which explored the aspiring rocker's fleeting dalliance with fame. "While we definitely took inspiration from the key moments in Eddie's larger story, the focus was a lot tighter here, as this is specifically about his relationship to *D&D*," explains Houser. "In that regard, we pulled from our own experiences of the friendships forged from gaming groups, and how much those experiences shape who you are."

"Eddie has been a bittersweet protagonist to write," adds Campbell. "Eddie is one of the most popular characters in *Stranger Things* for good reason, so writing about the moments that turned him into the guy we all love was a double-edged sword. It makes the end of his story sting that much more, but it's also a chance to get more Eddie in our lives."

In addition to familiar faces like Will, Lucas and Dustin, we can also expect to see characters from the novel, including Eddie's best friend Ronnie and the other members of his band Corroded Coffin, as well as some brand new Hellfire Clubbers. "Will, Lucas and Dustin were a pleasure to draw, and capturing their traits and dynamics was a highly rewarding challenge," says Galindo. "I also enjoyed working on characters like Ronnie, who connects with the events of *Flight Of Icarus*."

Describing him as "very expressive and passionate", Galindo especially enjoyed depicting Eddie. "To do him justice, it was essential to analyse each of his appearances in the fourth season, to the point of memorising them," he continues.

The four-parter sets the scene for season four's dramatic and tragic events. "At the heart of it, this book is about how *D&D* and the people he played it with shaped Eddie into the character we meet in the show," teases Houser. "While he isn't venturing near the Upside Down just yet, he is learning how to be a hero."

"This series acts as a prequel, expanding Eddie's backstory and helping us better understand his motivations and essence," adds Campbell. "Additionally, the pages are infused with elements from the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe. It's truly a tribute to both worlds!"

Stranger Things And Dungeons & Dragons: The Rise Of Hellfire issue one is out on 19 February.

ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

Master Of The Universe

Sacha Dhawan talks about returning to the role of the Doctor's arch-enemy WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

AS MANY *DOCTOR WHO* ACTORS HAVE found over the years, even when you're done with the TV series, it doesn't mean your character's over for you. So it is with Sacha Dhawan, the latest television Master, whose last appearance was in the Thirteenth Doctor's farewell extravaganza "The Power Of The Doctor". But for Dhawan – who popped up in five episodes of Jodie Whittaker's run – there was a nagging sense of unfinished business, that there was more to mine from this most manic incarnation of the Doctor's arch-nemesis.

"The great thing about the Master is there's still so much to cover," the actor tells Red Alert about his return to the role for audio producers Big Finish. "Even as I left the TV version, I was like, there's still more for me to do, to present a different side to the Master, to keep the audience on their toes – and these Big Finish episodes certainly do that."

MASTER CLASS

Dhawan makes his long-awaited return in *Call Me Master*, a three-story release written by Robert Valentine, Georgia Cook and Una McCormack that finally puts his version of the character front and centre. So what can we expect from these new Doctor-less Master adventures?

"Big Finish know exactly what they're doing with it," he says admiringly of the company that have been making officially sanctioned *Doctor Who* audio plays since 1999. "What we'll see is, the Master has no Doctor to be fighting against. He's very much in a form of isolation, which really rattles the Master and makes him question who he really is. Like, who is he, who is the man behind the mask, why does he behave in a certain way? That's something I've always wanted to tap into."

While these new plays certainly highlight a different, more thoughtful side to the Master, it was important to Dhawan that the stories still showcase the character's mischievous side.

"Oh, you're still going to get the beautiful chaos and the unpredictability," he says. "You're going to meet other characters along the way because if he doesn't have anyone to bounce off, he'll certainly find someone to toy with. What I like when I play the Master is allowing an element of unpredictability and allowing stuff to just happen in the moment. So I'll always do what's scripted, and then I like changing stuff – that's when you get moments of craziness.

"I discovered that when I did that scene on the plane [in the TV episode "Spyfall Part 2"]. I had an idea of how I was going to play the Master, and Chris [Chibnall] and [producer] Matt Strevens had seen elements of it, but in that moment, I was just like, 'Okay, close your eyes and throw yourself off the cliff and see what happens.' Sometimes it can be, okay, that doesn't work, but sometimes it can be quite magical."

Sacha Dawan in the recording booth.

BIG AUDIO DYNAMITE

These plays aren't the first time Dhawan has worked on *Doctor Who* in audio form, having, over the years, guested in the company's *Classic Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* ranges. As someone who does a lot of TV (*Line Of Duty*, *Wolf*, *The Prince*), how does audio work compare?

"They're slightly different disciplines," he says. "But I've grown up doing theatre and audio drama, and that's the core work as an actor. I absolutely love doing it. You don't have the visuals or the edit or the special effects, it's all about what's happening in your voice. So you strip all the effects and editing and it's really just about the craft and the writing in order to engage the listener. You've got to work hard and I like that, it challenges me."

Of course, Dhawan isn't the first Master to make the move to Big Finish, with Geoffrey Beevers, Eric Roberts, Derek Jacobi and Michelle Gomez already on the audio producer's books. Has he met up with any of his illustrious predecessors in the role, and does he hope to one day team up with them?

"I'd worked with Derek Jacobi on *Last Tango In Halifax*, and I've met Eric Roberts, who was super-lovely," he says. "But the one I was most starstruck by was meeting Michelle Gomez. I had to keep reminding myself that I was the Master too at some point, because I couldn't speak.

"I was like, wouldn't that be great for us to work together in some way, whether it'd be on Big Finish or to come back into *Doctor Who* at some point? I feel like we could really create some mayhem!"

Call Me Master is out 27 February.

BIG FINISH, BBC STUDIOS

> “What we’ll see is, the Master has no Doctor to be fighting against. He’s very much in a form of isolation”

SCI-FACT! Sacha Dhawan’s partner is actor Anjli Mohindra, who starred as Rani in ***The Sarah Jane Adventures***.

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Chris Evans to return to the MCU in **Avengers: Doomsday**.
- *Fantastic Four*’s Jeremy Allen White voicing Rotta the Hutt in **The Mandalorian & Grogu**.
- Jared Leto is Skeletor in the live-action **Masters Of The Universe** movie.
- Remake of **Chitty Chitty Bang Bang** on the way from EON Productions and Amazon.
- *Evil Dead Rise*’s Lee Cronin to write and direct a new take on **The Mummy**.
- Ella Purnell and Lukas Gage joining time travel thriller **Loser**.
- **The Batman** sequel has been pushed back to 1 October 2027 and will no longer be titled *Part II*.
- Christopher Nolan to direct **The Odyssey**, based on Homer’s mythic tale.
- *Batman* villain **Clayface** to headline his own DCU movie, written by Mike Flanagan.
- The *28 Years Later* saga continues with **The Bone Temple**, arriving 16 January 2026.
- Courteney Cox and Mason Gooding back to the stabbing for **Scream 7**.
- Jason Momoa is Lobo in **Supergirl: Woman Of Tomorrow**.

GILBERT FLORES/VARIETY/GETTY

SCI-FACT! **Henry Vogel enjoyed writing *Southern Knights* again so much that he is expanding his short story "Crush Hour" into a novella.**

AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

Textbook Example

From Badger to Grimjack, '80s Indie Comics Legends return in new short story anthology **Words Only**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

SUPPORTED BY A PAT BRODERICK COVER AND interior illustrations by many of the original artists, several classic '80s comics characters, including Concrete, Cerebus and Flaming Carrot, are eschewing the pictures as they make a comeback in new short story collection *Legends Of Indie Comics: Words Only*.

"Prose fits comfortably on Concrete," says the stone giant's creator Paul Chadwick. "My artwork has some cinematic moments but I've always leaned towards comics as a literary experience. Concrete's interior life has always been a focus: his ambivalence, his humiliations, his musings on the future."

"This is the first Doc Stearn prose story," continues Mr Monster's Michael T Gilbert. "I found it a fun challenge, working entirely in words, as it exercised a different part of my brain."

"Prose or comics, it makes no difference to me,"

Concrete is the one at the back, in case you wondered.

adds Badger's Mike Baron. "They are different forms though, and result in different experiences as there's added context and mood which you can only do in prose."

Setting "Never Pay" "in present-day America instead of looking back to the '80s/early '90s", Mark Verheiden has de-emphasised The American's superhero trappings. "In prose, I didn't feel obligated to include the costumed hero business from the comics," he says. "Instead, the focus is on a man who has been adrift since those early days."

Don Simpson's "Megaton Man: April's Fool" takes place in 1986, when lead character Trent Phloog's son Simon is about to celebrate his fifth birthday. "Stella, his mother, is determined that her son grow up a normal boy," explains Simpson. "Trent has lost his megapowers and they are parenting partners that have retired from megaheroics.

"But as the events of the day unfold, Yarn Man, Ms Megaton Man and others show up and the megaheroic world comes flooding back. There's more of a YA feel, a coming of age sensibility, which is very different to the more mature Megaton Man maxi-series."

> **"Prose allows for more character development but it also requires more data for the reader"**

Originally set in a post-apocalyptic Chicago instead of pan-dimensional city Cynosure, John Ostrander's Grimjack actually started out as a now long-lost short story before being adapted into comics. "Grimcat is a very different side to Grimjack," says Ostrander. "It's a new incarnation of the character."

"Prose allows for more character development but it also requires more data for the reader since there's no visuals to reinforce the script," says Those Annoying Post Brothers' Matt Howarth of his story, "LA Differential". "A downside is prose doesn't allow for any background action – a trick I frequently use."

Having originally created E-Man's gumshoe partner Michael Mauser with the late Nicola Cuti, Joe Staton co-wrote "Backup" with his wife Hilarie Staton. "I first came up with an opening sequence to set up a premise and a blazing gun battle for a final showdown," says Staton.

"The problem was how to get from one part to another. Our story was born out of a series of consultations between Hilarie and I, and hopefully our pal Nick would approve, even if we eventually dropped the gun battle!"

Legends Of Indie Comics: Words Only will be available soon.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

The Greatest Showman

The life of John Nathan-Turner comes to the stage in **Me And Him And Who** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

HAVING PRODUCED *DOCTOR Who* from 1980 until its cancellation in 1989, John Nathan-Turner was the Russell T Davies of his day. His colourful and sometimes tragic life has been chronicled in *Me And Him And Who*. Written by Stephen Wyatt, who scripted "Paradise Towers" and "The Greatest Show In The Galaxy", the play (first released as an audio drama) is now being staged in Manchester in late January before touring.

"John Nathan-Turner is obviously the key figure in *Who* in the '80s," Wyatt tells Red Alert. "Not least because he kept it going against all the financial odds and the tepid support – tending towards downright hostility – of the BBC drama department. When I worked on the show, I had no idea how much he wanted to move on, because he was always welcoming and supportive."

Me And Him And Who explores the devastating impact that *Doctor Who*'s demise had on Nathan-Turner both professionally and personally. "That's essentially what the play is about," says Wyatt. "John was made redundant at 43 and his only credit was *Doctor Who*.

"In the play, as in life, he tries to push other projects but they are always turned down so inevitably he falls back on *Who*-based spin-offs. He always keeps up a bold front but gradually loses hope after so many knockbacks. He had always been a heavy drinker but it gets out of control."

Central to the play is Nathan-Turner's relationship with his partner Gary Downie, who was unwell with cancer. "Many people – including me – found Gary difficult to get on with," recalls Wyatt. "He was spiky, bitchy and defensive but one of the things about writing a play, particularly a two-hander, is that you have to get inside all the characters.

"A lot of people – including me – were amazed when Gary started a counselling course as he wasn't an obvious match for such an empathetic role. But I realised that Gary was doing it to help him cope with John's deepening depression and insecurity.

"John had always been the top dog, with Gary very much in his shadow," he continues. "But the dynamic had changed as it was now John who needed looking after. Behind the camp jokes and the bickering, there was real affection as they helped each other through their serious health issues.

"I wanted to do a warts-and-all portrayal of them that included their sometimes predatory relations with young male *Who* fans, but not a hatchet job. They were very brave and very funny as they confronted an increasingly grim future."

Richard Unwin plays Nathan-Turner, who died in 2002 aged 54, while Paul Antony portrays Gary Downie, who passed away in 2006. "I pitched it to Richard as *Doctor Who* meets *Vicious*," says producer Gareth Kavanagh, whose Cutaway Comics have released a *Paradise Towers* series. "We wanted to cast from the LGBT community, as John and Gary were a pioneering, out gay couple from the '70s onwards."

Me And Him And Who is at The Seven Oaks, Manchester on 30-31 January and 2 February, and will be performed as part of JNT Day at the Anthony Burgess Foundation on 1 February.

SCI-FACT! **John Nathan-Turner first worked on *Doctor Who* in 1969, as a floor assistant on Second Doctor story "The Space Pirates".**

Invincible (right) in his new costume. Ooh, moody.

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Superhero Blues

Invincible's executive producers promise a dark season of growth and angst

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

IF YOU THOUGHT BURGEONING superhero Mark Grayson (voiced by Steven Yeun) might have earned even a tiny bit of a break after laying waste to the villainous Angstrom Levy (Sterling K Brown) in the season two finale of *Invincible*, you should think again.

When *Invincible* returns to Prime Video with eight new episodes in February, creator Robert Kirkman and showrunner Simon Racioppa confirm to Red Alert that Mark's got a *lot* going on this season, and a lot of it is not going to be great.

The season picks up with Mark, now 19 years old, still burdened with trying to earn the mantle of protector of Earth in the wake of his father Omni-Man's (JK Simmons) betrayal. He's being relentlessly trained by GDA director Cecil Stedman (Walton Goggins) to prepare for an impending Viltrumite invasion. On the homefront meanwhile, Mark's still protecting his mum, Debbie (Sandra Oh), and his Viltrumite-Thraxan half-brother, Oliver (Lincoln Bodin).

Racioppa says that this season, "Mark's going to face different challenges, so he's not going to be the same person that he was in season two. And at the end of season three, I can promise you, he's not the same person he was at the start of season three."

Feeling immense guilt for how he killed Levy, it's clear that Mark is still processing what his berserker rage allowed him to do when he wasn't in control of his powers. "This is a very dark period in Mark's life," Kirkman says. "Season three is where he gets put through the most intense paces he's experienced thus far."

In the comics, this period starts around issue 50 and is known by fans as Mark's "blue and black" costume era. "We're at least going to be covering a portion of that story in season three," Kirkman confirms. "But where we end up is hopefully going to be a surprise."

In fact, surprising the audience this season is something Kirkman and the writers made a priority. "One of the most exciting things about season three, for me, is really just the scale of it," Kirkman says.

"What we're trying to do on this show at all times is think about that audience perception. We think about how savvy people are watching all these streaming shows so we're figuring out ways to go, 'You think this show is going to go this way? Guess what? It's not.' We accomplished that in a lot of different ways in season three that I think people are going to be pretty shocked by."

While the impending Viltrumite threat to Earth is intensifying, Kirkman says Mark's biggest adversary this season will be Stedman. "He finds himself in opposition to Mark in a pretty abrupt and kind of startling way," Kirkman teases.

Is it a man? Is it a bird? Well, it's hard to explain...

Plus there will be plenty of new supervillains, and returning ones like Machine Head (Jeffrey Donovan), to thwart. "There are a couple of other characters that you're gonna see, where they had panels in the comic book and we just managed to open those up a little bit more, adding more panels between the panels in a couple of places in season three,"

Cecil Stedman is this season's Big Bad.

Dupli-Kate, Rex Splode and Invincible stare you out.

> **What we're trying to do on this show at all times is think about that audience perception**

Racioppa says. "That's super-fun to do, because the story is already there in the books. We're just showing a bit more of it."

That also goes for Debbie's growing storyline in the show, and weaving in the rapidly growing Oliver, who will suit up with Mark as Kid Omni-Man. But will that also apply to showing more about the Viltrumites as they prepare to invade Earth? Could we know more about them than what the comics revealed?

Kirkman laughs and offers, "There is at least one minute more of Viltrumites in this season than any other season. They're definitely getting their time."

Racioppa then adds, "To me, one of the big points in the books is they are *terrifying*. We all want to make sure that they stay absolutely terrifying. So you want to make sure that that always stays fresh in people's minds. They should be the most terrifying thing on screen whenever they're there. We don't want to dispel that, even if we decide at some point to give you a bigger view into their own motivations."

With *Invincible* season four deep in production, Kirkman confirms that Prime Video is still deeply supportive of the show, and that they are writing towards the best-case scenario of telling Mark's complete story. "If we don't end up getting to that [final] season, we will make it work and it will be fine. But we're just writing as if we've gotten a green light for a lot of seasons."

Invincible is on Prime Video from 6 February.

SCI-FACT! **The *Invincible* comic book spanned 144 issues, and completed Mark Grayson's story in 2018.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ **Silo** renewed for a third and fourth season on Apple TV+.
→ Matt Reeves confirms discussions are underway with showrunner Lauren LeFranc for a second season of **The Penguin**.
→ James Wan's production company Atomic Monster to adapt survivalist video game **Pacific Drive** for TV.
→ Olivia Williams, Callum Kerr, Luke Fetherston and Nuno Lopes joining the third season of **The Wheel Of Time**.

→ New animated **Power Rangers** series rumoured to be in development.
→ **Squid Game** creator Hwang Dong-hyuk reveals that the third and final season will arrive later this year, potentially in summer or the autumn.
→ DC adult 'toon **Creature Commandos** renewed for a second season on Max.
→ **Arcane** co-creator Christian Linke reveals multiple spin-offs are currently in development.
→ Sony Animation and Netflix to team on an animated **Ghostbusters** movie.
→ Prequel saga **Dune: Prophecy** renewed for a second season by HBO. Break out the spice!

MIKE MARSLAND/WIREIMAGE, GETTY

SCI-FACT! **Ryan North and artist Iban Coello introduced Dinosaur Doom in 2023's *Fantastic Four* issue 13.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Doom's Day

New sorcerer supreme Victor von Doom casts a spell on the Marvel Universe in **One World Under Doom**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

One of the nine different covers, by Rod Reis.

WHILE ROBERT DOWNEY JR IS set to don the Latverian ruler's sinister mask in the upcoming *Avengers: Doomsday*, Victor von Doom is taking on a new role in the Marvel comic book universe, after replacing Stephen Strange as Sorcerer Supreme in last year's *Blood Hunt*. Now we will see how he utilises that preternatural power after he declares himself global emperor in new nine-issue series *One World Under Doom*.

"Doom becoming Sorcerer Supreme is very bad news for anyone not named 'Doctor Doom'," laughs writer Ryan North. "It's been great to have that set-up to play with as the whole event spins out of that inciting incident."

With Victor boasting a soft spot for Reed and Sue Richards's young daughter Valeria, North is reflecting all of Doom's multi-faceted character including, improbably, his T-rex incarnation...

"Doom is my favourite villain precisely because of all the different aspects there are to his personality," says North, who also currently scripts Doom's long-time enemies the Fantastic Four's flagship title. "He can be operatic, he can be deadly, he's got science and he's got magic, so he's got it all. His relationship with Valeria is one of my favourite ones in comics, and I've been able to touch on it a little in my *Fantastic Four* stories so far. And yes, [alternate universe Doom] Dinosaur Doom will be there too, since on account of him being a Tyrannosaurus rex I simply couldn't leave him out!"

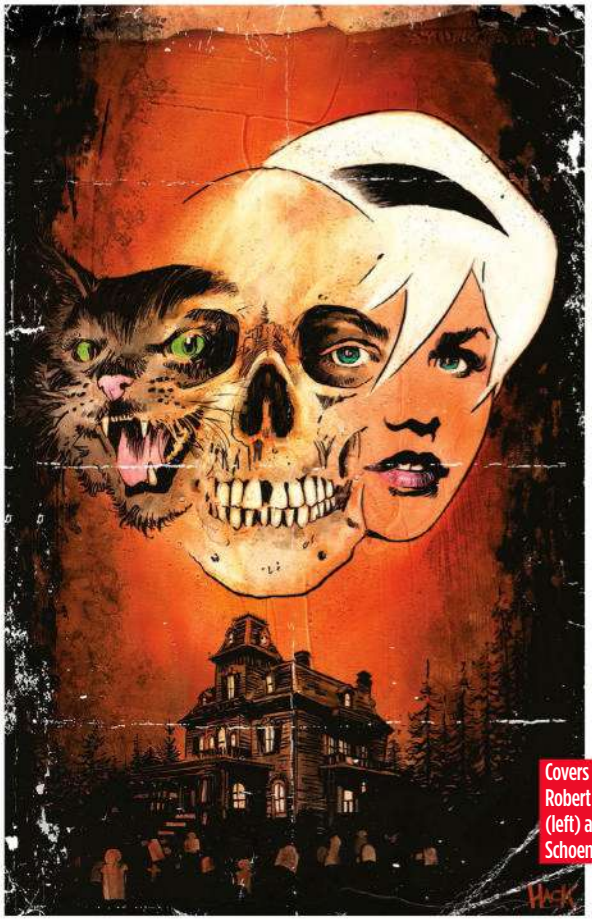
Orchestrating a line-wide crossover has been a significant change of pace. "The big idea in my *Fantastic Four* comics has been to tell shorter, self-contained stories: one issue usually, sometimes two – and that's been great," continues North. "But when you're plotting out an event, you get to exercise other muscles for a big, almost year-long story, so writing one has felt like a break from the other."

As Doom assumes control of global media and world leaders seem happy to go along with his nefarious plans, Earth's numerous Mightiest Heroes join forces to thwart his malevolent machinations. "I can't really say too much without spoiling things," teases North. "But I can say that the event touches every corner of the Marvel Universe on Earth."

Along with the Avengers, the Fantastic Four are central to what unfolds. "The FF certainly have a major part to play, and there's a pivotal scene in the first issue set in the Baxter Building in New York," adds North. "They'll be deeply impacted by what happens, particularly in issue two, which will have repercussions that'll last a while."

Praising his "great sense of drama", North is enjoying working with artist RB Silva. "His Doom is always the most imposing, impressive, almost biblical figure," he says. "He's able to transcend basic humanity to become this instantiation of an idea."

One World Under Doom issue one is out on 12 February.



Covers by Robert Hack (left) and Dan Schoening.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Cat People

Archie Comics' fantastical feline confronts his past in **The Nine Lives Of Salem**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AS "A GUY WHO HAS A handful of cats", Cullen Bunn is ideally suited to write the latest one-shot to star Sabrina Spellman's magical moggy, teaming up with artists Dan Schoening and Ben Galvan on *The Nine Lives Of Salem*.

"I thought it would be funny to incorporate some of my cats' mannerisms and – dare I say – attitudes into him," says Bunn, who depicts Salem as the John Constantine of the Archie Universe. "He has this awesome sinister vibe that really helps to sell the whole 'cat as an occult investigator' angle, and we definitely play with some of the feline tropes."

"Visually, it's important for me to convey Salem's posture and movement," adds Schoening, who provides designs and layouts before passing the finished art chores onto Galvan. "Being a cat, he has a specific way of slinking with an air of nonchalance and pomp, which are things Salem has in abundance.

"An appropriate trope for Salem in this issue is that he always lands on his feet. It just so happens that sometimes you're underneath, and his claws are out too!"

According to Bunn "you'll see straight away that this is a tale of supernatural horror", and Schoening has drawn inspiration from some classic British horror films. "I've always approached the Salem books as if they were a Hammer movie from the '60s," he explains. "This latest instalment is a perfect fit, as it takes place inside the mystifying Eyegor Manor, previously featured in last year's *Archie Halloween Spectacular* all-ages comic book. Spells and spirits are in Salem's wheelhouse and the story definitely leans into the infernal, and we've also upped the gore this time, so expect to see more red!"

"There's also some possessed animals and little demonic creatures," continues Bunn. "And Salem will be getting in over his head with some otherworldly creatures!"

Nine Lives follows on from 2022's self-contained *The Chilling Adventures Of Salem*, which also teamed Bunn with Schoening and Galvan. "There's a few nods to that story," says Bunn. "But it's a standalone tale, so you don't have to read anything else to have a good time with this issue."

Although Bunn insists that "the *Nine Lives* of the title might not be referencing his actual lives", Salem is placed in mortal danger as some familiar faces return, seeking vengeance for some "past sins" dating back to his days as a human warlock. "He will be encountering some past acquaintances, who don't necessarily have his best interests at heart," teases Bunn. "What follows isn't a 'cat and mouse' game as much as a 'demon and cat' scenario."

"You'll see just how feral Salem can get when he's backed into a corner, as well as some new entities that I had the pleasure of designing," adds Schoening. "We've raised the ante and I hope it brings some welcome chills to readers!"

The Nine Lives Of Salem is out on 19 February.

SCI-FACT! **Salem Saberhagen debuted in 1962's *Archie's Madhouse* issue 22 – turned into a cat as punishment for plotting his evil deeds.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Creature Commandos

Dynamite Entertainment's Warner Animation Line explores its animal side with **The Herculoids**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CENTRING UPON A family of space barbarians and their giant pets, *The Herculoids* is about to become the latest monthly series to join Dynamite Entertainment's rapidly expanding Warner Animation line. This launched last year with *ThunderCats* before continuing with series such as *Space Ghost*, *Jonny Quest* and *SilverHawks*.

"I'm a huge fan of the original *Herculoids* cartoon and I can actually remember watching it when it first aired in 1967 when I was five years old," recalls writer Tom Sniegoski. "Even in my earliest days as a comics creator, I was itching for the chance to put my spin on these characters."

It's set on the far-off planet of Amzot. Sniegoski is emphasising the vibrant chemistry between Zandor, Tara and their son Dorno and their various super-sized animal friends, which include laser dragon Zok, space rhino Tundro, rock ape Igoo and shapeshifters Gloop and Gleep.

"The relationships and interactions between all the Herculoids is a super-important part of my plans for the series," continues Sniegoski. "I'd really like to develop them all as there's so much more to say about these characters other than what we've seen in the two animated series."

While Amzot is home to a diverse range of animal species and geographic locations, the Herculoids initially won't be venturing too far beyond their immediate surroundings. "There isn't a ton of exploring and travelling going on in my first year, but we definitely get a taste of the planet," says Sniegoski. "The thing with Amzot is that it's always being threatened, as the planet is very desirable, and I'm going to do my best to explain why."

While their adversaries have previously included the Faceless People, the Mekkano mechanical men, Mutoids and hostile vegetable creatures the Ogs, Sniegoski refuses to reveal the identity of most of the villains the Herculoids will be coming up against. "You'll see some familiar threats from the various shows, and can I say Mole Men?" he teases. "The main threat is something from a very long time ago, and it has ties to the Herculoids and Amzot's origins. I don't want to say too much or I'll start spilling the beans on what's to come in the first year of the series."

Sniegoski also won't specify when exactly the series takes place. "There's no timeline other than the Herculoids have been living on and defending Amzot for a very long time," he continues. "The main storyline that runs through the first year of stories is based loosely on a concept introduced in the second series of animated shows in the '80s."

Sniegoski is joined on *The Herculoids* by artist Craig Rousseau, with whom he previously collaborated on *Young Hellboy*. "Craig is great because he knows exactly what I'm talking about and gives me exactly what I'm looking for," says Sniegoski.

"It's quite refreshing to be on the same page with your artist. What's super-exciting is that Craig has managed to capture the look of the animated series, but also has given the comic art its own special feel."

The Herculoids issue one is out on 19 February.

SCI-FACT! **Created by comics legend Alex Toth, *The Herculoids* ran for one season in 1967 before being revived in 1981.**

"The Savages" gets animated on DVD.

Ncuti with Varada Sethu as his new companion.

Rose Ayling-Ellis will be guesting in the new series.

Doctor Who: The Collection goes full Pertwee.

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ It's been announced that Rose Ayling-Ellis MBE will be appearing in a second season episode to air later this year.

Showrunner Russell T Davies said: "We always want guest actors on *Doctor Who* to have fun, but Rose takes it to a whole new level. She storms in with an astonishing performance of terror, anger and bravery in one of the most frightening episodes we've ever made."

Ayling-Ellis said: "I loved *Doctor Who* when I was growing up, so being cast in the show was a dream come true. My inner child is ecstatic with excitement! Working with Russell and filming alongside the talented cast and crew has been an incredible experience. Ncuti is a wonderful Doctor, and I can't wait for audiences to see what we have created together."

◆ ***A trailer for season two is now available on YouTube, featuring Varada Sethu as new companion Belinda. New promotional shots of Sethu and Ncuti Gatwa were also released.***

◆ Jon Pertwee's debut season will be the next release for *Doctor Who: The Collection*. Season seven will be available as a limited edition set shortly.

◆ ***Also coming to Blu-ray – and DVD – are an animated version of "The Savages" (on 24 March) and The War Games In Colour.***

◆ Various tie-in books are planned for later this year. *The Official Doctor Who Puzzle Book: 150 Timey-Wimey Brainteasers To Test Your Wits* by Simon Fox is released on 24 April. *100 Scariest Monsters* by Gosho Aoyama is out on 21 October, with short story collection *The Sequels* following two days later.

Also released in October are hardback novelisations of previous Big Finish stories "Jubilee" and "The Chimes Of Midnight".

◆ ***Previously announced book 1001 Nights In Time And Space, by Paul Magrs and Steve Cole, gets the audiobook treatment on 18 September.***

◆ Forbidden Planet will release a range of shirts, badges and coasters featuring the Malus in February.

◆ ***Telos Publishing to release merchandise guide book Evolution Of The Toy Dalek on 1 March.***

◆ Big Finish will release audio dramas *The Death And Life Of River Song: Ace And Tegan* in March and *Dark Gallifrey: Missy*, starring Michelle Gomez and Sylvester McCoy, in April.

Classic Doctors New Monsters 5: Faithful Friends, starring Miriam Margolyes, was released in January.

Doctor Who is on BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally).

IMAGES: BBC STUDIOS, YELLOWBELLY

SCI-FACT! **Season two is expected to air in early 2025 with Russell T Davies telling *The One Show* that "it's coming sooner than you think".**

SCI-FACT! **Stevens first appeared as Venus in "The Decapod", broadcast 13 October 1962.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

JULIE STEVENS 1936-2024

Remembering the forgotten *Avengers* girl

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Rarely recalled as part of the kick-ass pantheon of *Avengers* stars, Julie Stevens had the distinction of being one of the show's first female leads.

Born Julia Maria Bullas in Prestwich, Lancashire, she originally trained as a nurse at Manchester Royal Infirmary. Success in a talent contest at 20 led to a TV contract with ABC, where she worked as an announcer, compere and comedienne.

In 1962 she debuted as crime-busting nightclub chanteuse Venus Smith in season two of *The Avengers*, one of three new characters designed to replace departing star Ian Hendry, who had played David Keel opposite Patrick Macnee.

Julie Stevens in *The Avengers*, 1962.

Alternating with Honor Blackman's leather-clad Cathy Gale and Jon Rollason's Martin King, Venus offered a new kind of foil for Macnee's Steed. "Venus was created as an entirely different character from Cathy Gale," remembered producer Leonard White. "Her character could take the stories into underworld settings where Keel and Cathy Gale wouldn't necessarily have belonged."

Called upon to sing in every episode, Stevens found herself struggling with Venus's swinging stylings. "I was just a very ordinary girl from Manchester, who used to listen to Elvis. It didn't seem to bother them that I had no singing experience at all!"

Crowned with a gamine, bleached blonde crop by legendary '60s hairdresser Vidal Sassoon, Stevens appeared in six episodes of season two, soon realising she was eclipsed by Honor Blackman's statuesque and charismatic Mrs Gale. "Honor had become this huge whirlwind," she recalled. "So when it came time for them to take up the option on my contract, I didn't even consider asking anybody if they'd let me stay, because her character was so good, so strong."

Beyond *The Avengers*, Stevens appeared as the slave girl Gloria in 1964's *Carry On Cleo* and was a regular *Play School* presenter between 1964 and 1978.

STUDIOCANAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

OLIVIA HUSSEY 1951-2024

British actress whose genre credits include *Black Christmas* and *Psycho IV: The Beginning*.

DAVID A MCINTEE 1968-2024

Writer and prolific author of *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* and *Space: 1999* tie-in fiction.

NEW AUTHOR

MOLLY O'NEILL

MEET THE ENGINEERING GEOLOGIST BEHIND THE 1600S-SET *GREENTEETH*

Tell us about your protagonists.
Jenny Greenteeth is an ancient monster living in a village lake. She's disturbed when an angry mob tries to drown a witch in her waters, and decides to rescue her. The two unlikely allies then join forces to take down the creeping evil in the village.

Did anything in particular spark the idea?
I had Jenny's voice in my head, but I didn't know what her story was. I wondered how a lake monster would ever meet someone, and the idea of a witch being drowned and how she would react set the story in motion. I wanted Jenny to be tidy and house-proud but also quite visceral, not a cutesy monster. She could as easily eat you as save your life.

How long did the novel take to write?
I started in April and finished it by November. Then there was about six months of edits with my agent, my editor and beta readers. The core of the plot was the same all along, but some twists and turns were added.

How much research was involved?
I didn't do much! I grew up in the Cotswolds and have lived or spent time in all the locations in the book. Part of the joy of writing was sitting in Sydney and remembering beautiful places I've been and translating them to the page.

Any advice for *SFX* readers who are budding authors?
Authors often say they've been writing since childhood, but I didn't start till my late twenties, so I'd say it's never too late! Read all you can, and then just sit down and write. The more you write, the more ideas will come.

Greenteeth is out on 25 February, published by Orbit.

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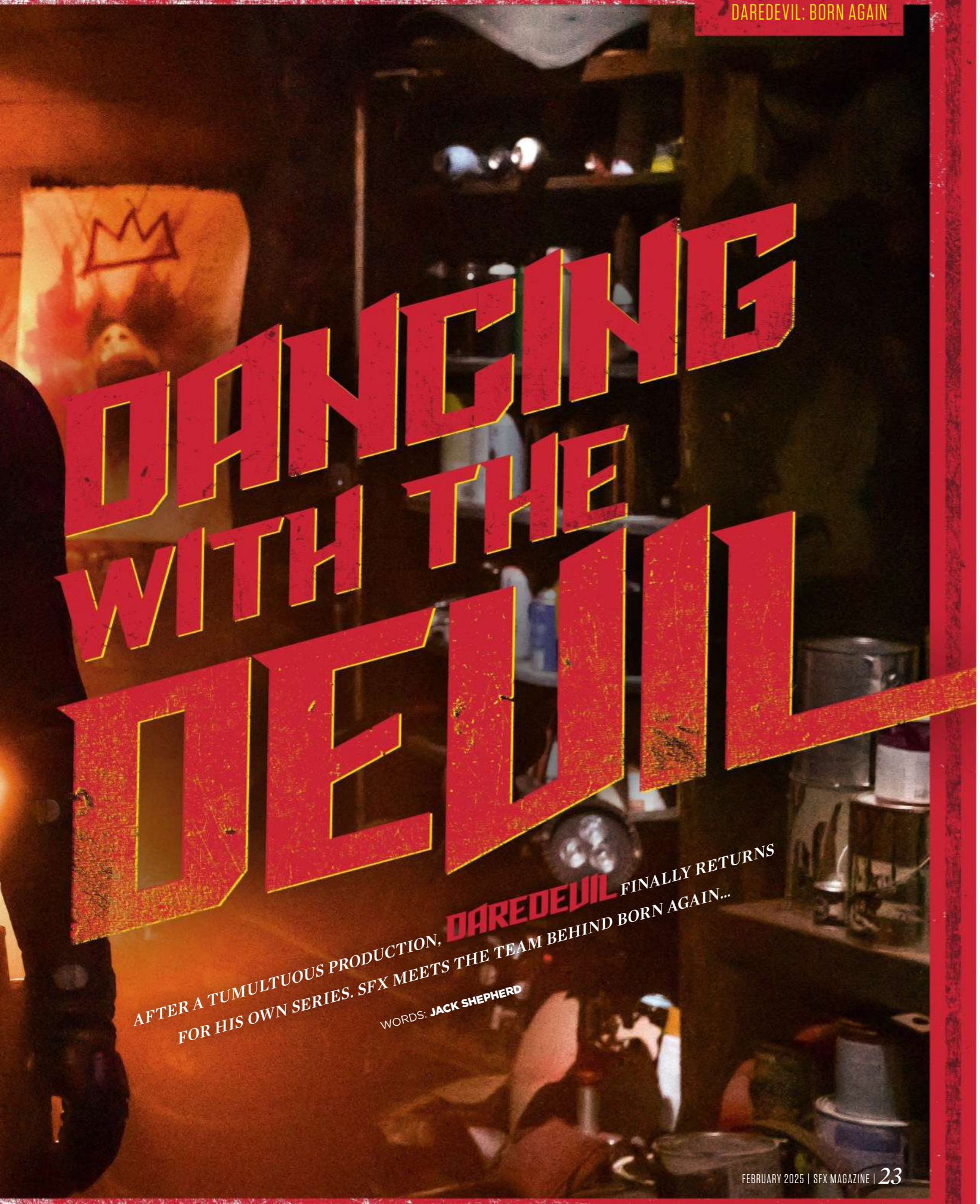


DANCING WITH THE DEVIL

AFTER A TUMULTUOUS PRODUCTION, DAREDEVIL FINALLY RETURNS FOR HIS OWN SERIES. SFX MEETS THE TEAM BEHIND BORN AGAIN...

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

SEVEN YEARS ago, Charlie Cox's world was rocked. Preparations had begun for the fourth season of *Daredevil* when Netflix, seemingly out of nowhere, decided to pull the plug.

The series that had been part of Cox's life for almost five years was over and Matt Murdock's story would remain unfinished. But then, two years later, Kevin Feige called. The Marvel boss wanted to know whether Cox would return as the blind vigilante lawyer in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* and *She-Hulk*.

Those two projects were filmed in 2021, but it wasn't until January 2022, following the release of the rapturously received *No Way Home*, that Marvel decided *Daredevil* deserved a second chance going solo. What followed could have easily been dubbed The Year of The Devil: the original Netflix series moved to Disney+, a revival series was announced at San Diego Comic-Con, and Matt got lucky in *She-Hulk*.

Charlie Cox is back as Daredevil/ Matt Murdock.

STRIKE FORCE

Come 2023, the cameras started rolling on *Born Again* and everything was going smoothly – until, that is, the actors' strike.

With production forced to pause, Marvel took a long, hard look at the already filmed six episodes and realised something shocking: it simply wasn't working. Cue a creative overhaul that saw head writers Matt Corman and Chris Ord being replaced by *The Punisher* alumnus Dario Scardapane.

"[The footage] had some really strong points," Scardapane tells *SFX*, "but it wasn't feeling in line with what Daredevil had been established to be."

The problems stemmed from *Born Again* trying to continue elements of the Netflix series while also soft-rebooting it. The character Vanessa – wife of the villainous Wilson Fisk – had been recast, while rumours spread online that Foggy Nelson and Karen Page, Murdock's best friends, were killed off in the premiere.

To fix things, Scardapane and Marvel made a pivotal decision: Netflix's *Daredevil* (along with the other Defenders shows) would officially become part of MCU canon.

A new pilot was shot, this one acting as a bridge between season three and the events of *Born Again*. The other six episodes were retooled, new scenes were shot, the 18-episode season was split into two nine-episode seasons, and Ayelet Zurer, the original Vanessa, was brought back.

This, however, created another problem. Scardapane didn't want new viewers to have to watch the Netflix series to understand *Born Again*. Luckily, the answer was right in front of him. "At the very end of the Netflix show, Foggy, Karen and Matt had a dream written out on the back of a napkin," the showrunner says. "We start with that dream. It's not a dream that needs too much explanation; three good friends go into business together." He also felt that Daredevil's origin story didn't need retelling. "It's very obvious early on that he is a blind man with something up about him. It's very, very early on that you realise, due to a certain amount of generational trauma, he has a pretty advanced sense of justice.

> **"The earlier show, at its best, was fantastic. At its worst, it was two characters in a room"**

"The animosity between him and Kingpin has been there for so long, the actors carry it with them in every scene. You don't have to say, 'Oh, they're each other's main nemesis.' You just craft a scene where they're essentially threatening each other."

Born Again does not borrow from the scrapped plans for the fourth season and instead tells a different story. "This, in many ways, without sounding overly pretentious, is a

PICTURES: GIOVANNI RUFINO/ MARVEL. STOCK IMAGES: ANHELINA LISNA/GETTY

Karen, Matt and Foggy yuck it up after work.

The old "get him stuck in a doorway" trick.

Greek tragedy," Scardapane says. "The villain wins, is the best way of putting it. We see Fisk, finally, for many different reasons, consolidate power in a manner that we've never seen before. At the same time, Matt is wrestling with his alter ego. He's asking, 'Am I Daredevil? Am I Matt Murdock?' It's the first time we see a Matt Murdock who's on the back foot and more reactive to the bold moves of Kingpin."

Kingpin – the colossal, terrifying crime lord played by Vincent D'Onofrio – was last seen in *Echo* watching a news report highlighting New York's open-field mayoral race. Scardapane won't confirm whether Fisk will run for mayor, merely saying he makes "a very bold move for power" and emphasises how Kingpin is the hero of his own "completely deluded" story.

"There is more fun in the moments with these characters and a lot less navel-gazing than before," he adds. "The earlier show, at its best, was fantastic. At its worst, it was two characters in a room talking about what a hero is. I felt that had been done. I'm not taking swipes. I just didn't want to hear characters grousing about their lot in life. I wanted to see them doing things."

Having previously worked on *The Punisher*, Scardapane knows a thing or two about how those Netflix shows worked. "One of our edicts was longer scenes," he says. "You had these long five-page scenes of characters hashing it out in order to make space between these massive action sequences. The way stuff has evolved since then, we're able to do big action sequences at a lot more pace.

"I really feel that Netflix's *Daredevil*, which I know in my blood, was much more noir, and this show is more New York crime story," he continues. "It has elements of *The Sopranos* and *King Of New York*. There's a feeling for those classic '90s crime tales.

"It has a pace and a scope that, for a lot of reasons, Netflix wasn't able to do. They were very dark, cinematically, not necessarily

Continued on page 30...

MATT'S BACK

Charlie Cox talks wearing the horned cowl again...

Does *Born Again* feel like getting the band back together?
It does. That was all very special. When we were cancelled in 2018, they had just pitched me the new season – what the story was going to be – and I just assumed we would be shooting on the same schedule. We never really had our moment to say goodbye and close the chapter. It was very emotional, after so many years, to be back and talking about the past and all of those things.

Would you say it feels like a season four?
It does. But there was a U-turn after the strike, where we were headed in one direction which was interesting and valid. The argument was, if we're coming back after all these years, we don't want to just do exactly the same thing.

Marvel looked at the episodes and knew it wasn't quite working. We shot a whole new pilot and they reorganised what we had filmed to make it feel more like the show we had shot all those years previously. Given what a Herculean task that was, it's very impressive what they achieved.

You previously said, "If we're going to do it, it has to feel different!"
We had to honour certain things about the [original] show, certain tonal aspects, which wasn't being done. For example, it wasn't very dark and it is now. At times, it's incredibly sinister, incredibly brutal. These characters work best when they live in that world.

But it doesn't feel like exactly the same. The pacing is different. The identity has shifted. It's six years later. The kind of shows that people watch on television, they influence how you make a TV show.

Were you surprised it wasn't Disney-fied?
I was hugely shocked. I expected it to be dumbed down quite a lot, and that has not been the case at all. In fact, there are a couple of scenes that I find difficult to watch, and I don't remember feeling that way previously. There was nothing I couldn't stomach but there are two scenes this season that I'm like, "Oh god, brutal!"

Where do we find Matt at the beginning of this season?
The reason it feels like a hybrid of a season four and a season one is because enough time has passed where you can allow for enough of a reset and things don't need to be explicitly on camera. Matt has come to the realisation that maybe he underestimates collateral damage, and despite all the good he's been trying to do, how much has it actually worked? How much has just spawned more problems?

Maybe he needs to put more of his energy into the work he does with the lawyer and helping people out in a legal way. There's a scene where he meets with Kingpin and they say, "You stay out of my way, I'll stay out of yours, we won't have any problems." The rest of the season is a collision course between those two people pushing boundaries and forcing each other to cross lines they don't want to cross.

Who does Matt have the most interesting relationship with this season, other than Kingpin?
The relationship between Matt and Karen is very different. A new relationship, which was really fun, was with this character, Heather Glenn, played by Margarita Levieva. Matt finds himself in a new and healthy relationship. What they discover about each other is that they have very different views about the role of a superhero, a masked vigilante, and that leads to some poignant conversations.

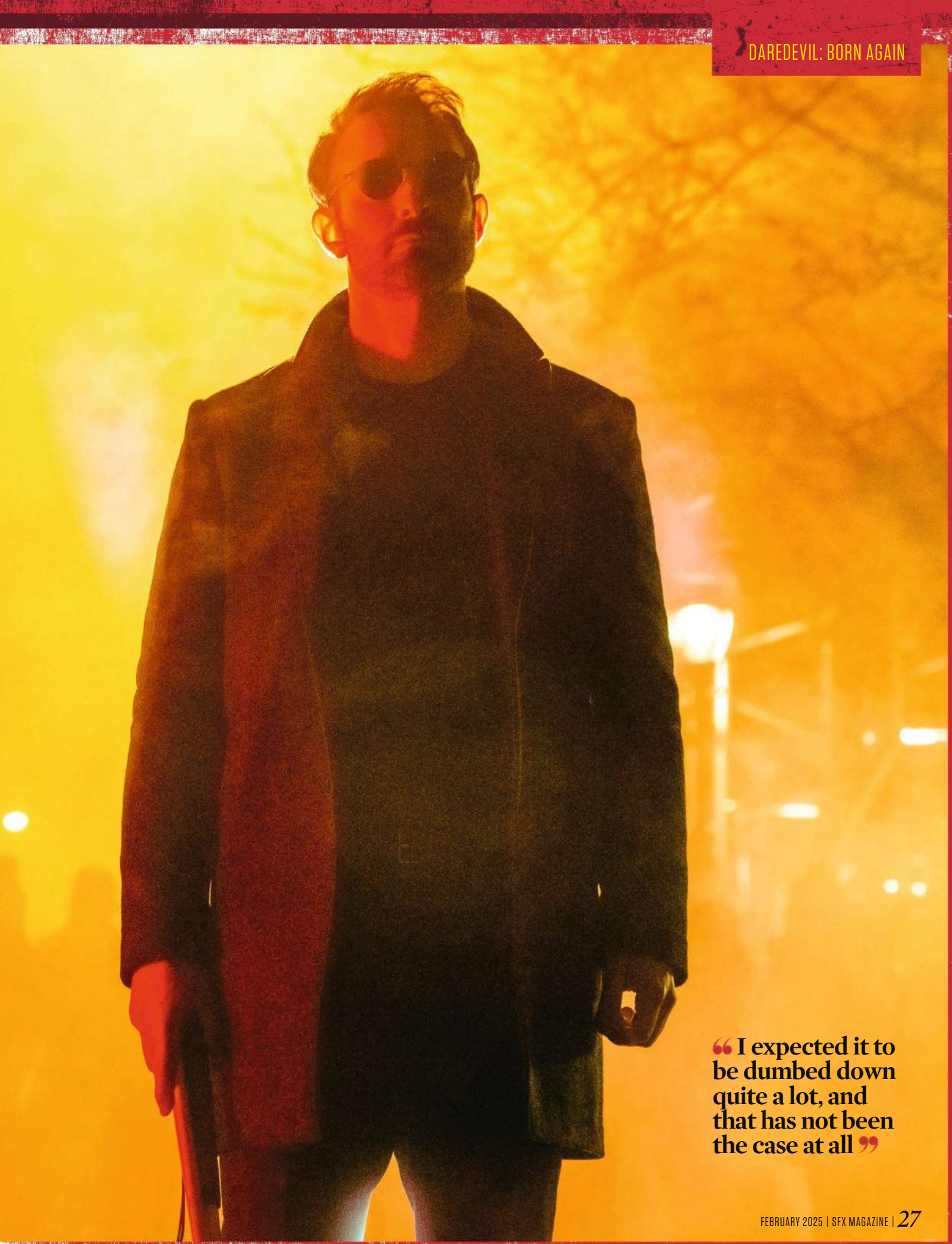
Does it feel like the show is part of the wider MCU?
I honestly don't know. Maybe I'm too close to it. We have a couple of fun cameos, and I've been in *Spider-Man* and *She-Hulk*. We're in a larger universe, but the show does often feel like we are down and dirty in the grimy streets of New York. Sometimes it feels a bit claustrophobic and isolated in that regard.

How long could you play this character, do you think?
I feel rejuvenated and lucky and blessed that I'm still being given the opportunity to play this character. You so rarely get to do such a varied palette of tasks as an actor. I get all of this cool stuff as a lawyer, I get emotional scenes with various love interests, and then I get to wear an awesome superhero costume and jump off rooftops. I love all of it.

Normally, when you go into your tenth year playing a character, you're winding down, but we're going the other way. It would be interesting to know what gives up first, Marvel's faith in us or our bodies!

It would be cool to see him leading the Avengers.
That would be awesome.

Cox with directors Aaron Moorhead and Justin Benson.



“I expected it to be dumbed down quite a lot, and that has not been the case at all”

RETURN OF THE KING

Vincent D'Onofrio on Wilson Fisk's terrifying rise to power

How have the events of *Hawkeye* and *Echo* affected Kingpin?
They were kind of different iterations of the Fisk from the original show. My job is to service the story. *Hawkeye* was one style of show, very far away from the Netflix series, and the way Fisk was written itself – which was really good – was a completely different world. When I did *Echo*, they leaned into the grittiness, but when it came to Fisk, it still was not quite the original thing. We've had the chance now to do it the way we wanted to do it.

Do you think the vision for this show became clearer following the creative overhaul?
I felt the character lives best in a down-to-earth, gritty world, darker story. There are things in this new series that Charlie and I weren't even sure were going to make the cut, but they did. We went really dark at times. [With the first version of the show], Charlie and I were saying, "We're not doing it right yet. We need to start again." We pushed for that. And we were lucky that these guys who run Marvel supported us.

Fisk is reaching for power this season. Is this the most dangerous we've seen him?
He is becoming increasingly dangerous, and I think he is flexing his darkness and his power, and he's trying to basically gaslight a city, and then eventually a country, and then eventually a world. That's the way he thinks and there's no stopping him.

The most fun for me is to play the character in the darkest way possible. He believes that his word is gospel, and he's just putting up with everybody else. He's truly broken. But he believes that being who he is, through and through, is the only way to succeed. They called him Kingpin for a reason: he really does behave like a king.

What does he do this season that we haven't seen him do before?
It's something that's common in the comics, especially from [Frank] Miller forward: he's testing himself. You're going to see him volunteering himself to be in situations that he may or may not be able to handle, and just because of his dark side, he moves forward through it. I am very familiar with playing this character, but he changes scene by scene. It's interesting to put this character in any circumstance and see what will happen. He can't help but be him.

Have you been able to dive deeper into the character this season and has that led to the quality being elevated?
One of the things that I have to remind myself is that we are well into discussing the second season and what's going to happen. We're working towards something that's quite cool that I obviously can't talk about. This first season is setting the table, and like any well-written series, we hope that the audience will understand.

Not that this season is not jam-packed with awesome things, because it is, but we're working towards something else – something that people don't know about, that we're not even completely clear on. Marvel keeps a lot of secrets. Our bosses don't always tell us until the last minute, but we do get clues.

How has the physicality of the role changed, as you're wearing a fat suit now rather than putting on weight?
It helps. I kept that weight on for so long for the Netflix series, because we would wait so long between seasons. After Thor gained weight on screen, they got better with the suits and prosthetics. I was very happy about that. I had most of the weight still on in *Hawkeye*, but I started to wear a suit. Then in *Echo*, I was going back towards my normal weight and wore a suit that I wore in this one.

We did other little things to sell the size of him but we're going further. The size he ends up at the end of the first season, he'll stay that way, but we're doing some things in this new season we're about to shoot that require his size to be more specific and more detailed.

How long can you see yourself playing this character?
It's so fun. I can't wait to see what more they're going to do with him. It's up to Marvel whether they'll have me or not. This character that Marvel came up with is so amazing. I don't feel like it will stop. As far as movies and stuff like that, I only hope that will happen. But when it comes to that, Charlie and I, we are the last ones to find out what's going to happen. I'll continue as long as they'll have me.

story-wise, although there were some dark elements. We're much darker. This is as far as a Disney+ show has ever gone."

SFX points out that it sounds similar to DC's *The Penguin*. "It's really strange," Scardapane responds. "You work in a vacuum and then something else comes out, and you go, 'Oh, wow.' I would say, in many ways, *The Penguin* is our direct competition. However, we're even more grounded, even less stylised, even more rooted in the here and now. I loved *Penguin*. We're a little faster, meaner, cleaner in our storytelling."

PREPARE TO BE PUNISHED

Born Again being described as "less stylised" will raise a few eyebrows; after all, this version of Murdock has fought alongside an attorney who happens to turn into a hulking green giant when she's angry. In fact, whereas the previous iteration of *Daredevil* had little impact on the overall MCU, this show has real consequences.

"Marvel has a master plan, and what you're doing causes ripple effects," Scardapane explains. "I would pitch stuff very early and I would hear that they had other plans. I have plenty of leeway up until I hit the larger-scale plan for the MCU. So I try to ignore some stuff [from the wider universe].

"We establish a very specific Daredevil, both in terms of his dilemma, down to the suit and where we're picking him up in his life. You can say that *Daredevil* is canon in the MCU, those other events [in *Spider-Man* and *She-Hulk*] happened, but some of them we are not leaning into. His one-night stand with She-Hulk may be one of those things."

Daredevil will be coming up against some familiar faces in *Born Again*. First, there's Jon Bernthal's Punisher, who previously debuted in the second season of *Daredevil*, then there's Ms Marvel's father.

"They've moved Matt through other corners of the MCU, and now he's back in his own story," Scardapane says. "I don't want to give anything away, but you're going to see a character [in our show] you never thought you would, but they get folded into the story in a manner that is organic and exists in our world. New York, in the current state of the MCU, has a lot of stuff going on."

Bringing back Punisher was a thrill for Scardapane – he was planning a third season of Frank Castle's series before it was cancelled – and *Born Again* was a chance to settle some unfinished business. Similarly, there's now an opportunity to bring back other Netflix characters, including Jessica Jones and Luke Cage. Scardapane won't detail who's on the agenda but will wax lyrical about the return of Foggy and Karen.

"Karen Page is the heart and soul of this mythology, there's no two ways about it," he says. "You get so much more out of Daredevil as a character, as a human being, when there's interaction with Karen. We've brought her back in a way that gives stakes. Karen and Foggy are the family structure for our orphan Matt, and it was very important to have them. Foggy tends to be comic relief, and Karen tends to be something else entirely.

Matt meets Wilson Fisk (Vincent D'Onofrio).

> **"When the system is corrupt and illegal, the only justice comes from outlaws"**

"And you know, all those rumours are true. None of them are true. I refer people to the comic books where the fate of both those characters has happened many times in different ways."

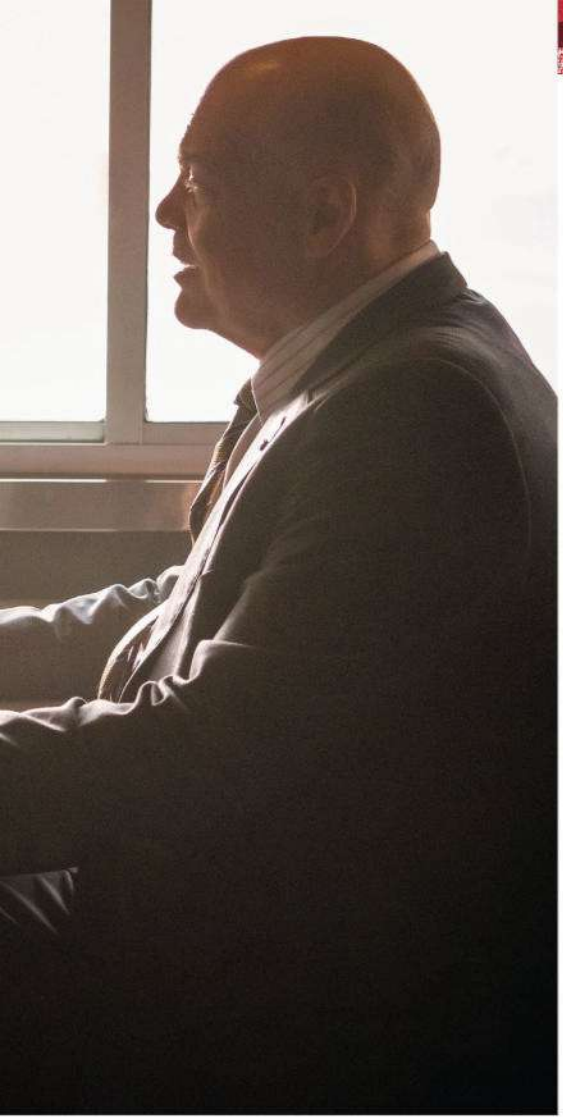
There are a handful of new characters set to be introduced, including Michael Gandolfini's Fisk protégé "who gets pulled into a world he barely understands" and a member of law enforcement who works with Murdock. "They're called Cherry, played by... a walking Easter egg is the best way of putting it," Scardapane says. Their relationship helps illustrate Matt's relationship with the law and also highlights how his conscience isn't exactly clear.

"The conflict between the lawyer who seeks justice in the courtroom and the vigilante who seeks justice on the street has been well travelled, and we're flipping that on its head," Scardapane says. "We had this idea that, when the system is corrupt and illegal, the only justice comes from outlaws. Now, everything Daredevil does is completely illegal, but it's the only way to reset the balance. He's integrating both sides of himself. We explore that way deeper and way darker than was ever done before."

There's that word again: dark. Cox and D'Onofrio use it multiple times in conversation and highlight how fans have been calling for *Born Again* to continue Daredevil's penchant for violence and corridor fights.

"There is a scene this season that is straight out bat-shit and way farther past anything Netflix ever did and it's absolutely earned," says Scardapane. "When you have violence for

"Pull this wire and find out what happens."



violence's sake, it gets boring. With Kingpin particularly, you have to remind people that this large, imposing, extremely entertaining individual is the villain, and we do that in a big way."

When *SFX* catches up with Scardapane, work has just started on season two, making *Born Again* only the second live-action Marvel Studios series to land a follow-up. That's partly because the studio has changed its philosophy when it comes to television.

"They had used a model that, for better or worse, was TV shows split into six-hour movies. This is a serialised television show," Scardapane says. "Each season ends in a place that you could walk away. But you could also go in a new direction.

"This push and pull with Fisk and Matt had become almost stasis, and we've created something that moves it, that has a different vibe, a different dynamic, that can twist and turn, and it's got legs.

"I always say that TV shows are like running a marathon," he continues. "You run at a sprint and then they put a bullet in your head at the end. You just keep going until the show is cancelled or it finds its end. And we're not done yet. I don't think the story of Karen Page, Matt Murdock and Frank Castle will ever be over."

Daredevil: Born Again is on Disney+ from 5 March.

MARVEL'S TV KINGPIN

Head of Marvel Television, Brad Winderbaum, talks the future of the MCU on the small screen

Marvel's TV shows started more directly tied to the movies than *Daredevil*.
It was really cool at the beginning, how tied in they were. It felt like the movies were in your home, and it was a great way to launch Marvel on Disney+. As time went on, the shared universe started to feel like an obligation to people and that cost us a sense of discovery, especially on the television side. That's part of why we have now rebranded and separated Marvel Television from Marvel Studios. We wanted to create that sense of discovery you have when you walk into the comic book store and there are many different types of comics to read.

***Daredevil* already seems different to those limited series simply because it's getting a second season.**
The limited series format is really cool and exciting and has a big scale to it, but it is different from a television show. It's similar to a long-form movie. A real show has more of a call-and-response element with the audience where, if you're lucky enough to have multiple seasons, you are listening to what storylines are striking people in particular ways. It is our goal to make shows that have an annual cadence, that feel like longer-form character studies, like truly great television shows do.

Are there any limited series you might revisit?
There are, but part of the challenge is scale. *WandaVision* was our least expensive live-action show, and keeping costs down allows us to take more risks and explore areas that the movies aren't going to explore. We were casting movie stars, making limited series that could stand up to the features, which created some of the best material Marvel's done.

But to make a season two would require matching that level of production and that comes at a great expense. Versus scaling down to a place where you can create something that has incredible characters and great storytelling that can be released annually.

Will these smaller shows have to react to the events of an Avengers movie?
The shared universe still exists. But the way I look at Daredevil's corner of the universe is that these are real people living in New York dealing with very grounded problems. There may be giant global events that influence the psyche of these characters, but when someone's dealing with their own personal freedoms, or there's something unjust happening on the street level, that is going to take priority. They might be aware of the cosmic, but they're also like, "I need to eat".

How does the reception to something like *Agatha All Along* affect the future development of these shows?
You never know where the universe is going to take you. We're a major brand, but I still think we're just a rag-tag group. We are still trying to figure it out as we go which is part of what makes the whole thing work. We're open to lots of different avenues for these stories to go down.

We're developing more like a traditional studio on the television side. We don't want to go into production with something that doesn't feel ready. We have a traditional pilot program now. We're not going to green-light based on just written material.

Earlier on in our Disney+ experience, we were creating them much like films, where we had an idea, we set an intention and a release date, and hell or high water, we hit it. We realised we needed to pivot and part of that is seeing what shows rise to the top before we go full speed ahead.

MCU supervillain Muse: be very afraid.

MAKE MINE MARVEL

WITH *DAREDEVIL* ALMOST HERE, *SFX* LOOKS AHEAD TO THE NEXT COUPLE OF YEARS OF MARVEL – AND BEYOND

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

This motley crew are coming to cinemas soon.

Ani-Spidey in *Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man.*

YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD SPIDER-MAN

Release date: 29 January
Episode count: 10

Peter Parker returns – but not as you know him. This animated series explores how the web-slinger's life would have been different had Norman Osborn, not Tony Stark, been his mentor.

Hudson Thames voices Parker, while Colman Domingo is a twisted Osborn who persuades his young protégé to do things the wrong way. The show "celebrates the character's early comic book roots" and sees Parker face off against villains including Doc Ock, Chameleon, Rhino and Scorpion.

Plus, despite this series not taking place on the Sacred Timeline, Charlie Cox's Daredevil and Vincent D'Onofrio's Wilson Fisk both appear.

BLADE

Release date: TBA
Director: TBA

Mahershala Ali was first revealed to be the new Blade back in 2019. Yet despite voicing the character in an *Eternals* post-credits scene, his version of the character seems no closer to reaching cinemas.

Blade has undergone multiple creative upheavals, with various writers and directors being attached and then leaving. Eric Pearson – who co-wrote *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Fantastic Four* – is the latest scribe to have a crack at the script.

★★★★★

ARMOUR WARS

Release date: TBA
Director: TBA

The character of War Machine has been a fixture of the MCU since its inception, yet Don Cheadle's character has had an upward battle getting his own movie.

Armour Wars was first announced in 2020 as a six-episode series dealing with the fallout of Tony Stark's weapons falling into the wrong hands. Those plans have changed, and *Armour Wars* will now be a movie.

THUNDERBOLTS*

Release date: 2 May ★ **Director:** Jake Schreier

Julia Louis-Dreyfus's Valentina Allegra de Fontaine has been hiring anti-villains for some time now. *Thunderbolts** will finally see her plan come to fruition, as Yelena (Florence Pugh), Taskmaster (Olga Kurylenko), Red Guardian (David Harbour), John Walker (Wyatt Russell), Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan), and Ghost (Hannah John-Kamen) are hired for a top-secret mission which has them meet Lewis Pullman's Sentry, though it's unclear whether he will be friend or foe. Louis-Dreyfus previously teased how de Fontaine is "after power, control, and just generally wants to kick ass." As for what that asterisk means, rumours say the titular team could be renamed by the time the credits roll.

X-MEN '97

SEASONS 2 & 3

Release date: TBA
Episode count: TBA

After season one ended with the X-Men dispersed through time, anticipation for season two has been high. Following the departure of original showrunner Beau DeMayo, replaced by *What If...?* alumnus Matthew Chauncey, the series is back on track, with the follow-up coming in 2026 at the earliest. Chauncey will also act as showrunner on an already confirmed third season.

★★★★★

DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

SEASON TWO

Release date: TBA
Episode count: Nine

As Dario Scardapane tells *SFX* in our cover feature, *Daredevil* will return for at least one more season. "We're very, very deep into season two right now," he reveals. Expect Matt Murdock and Kingpin to be at each other's throats once more as this New York crime story continues.

Matt's back! And he will be again, as *Daredevil*.

Dominique Thorne as Riri Williams/ Ironheart.

IRONHEART

Release date: 24 June
Episode count: Six

Considering the first trailer was shown behind closed doors at D23 back in 2022, *Ironheart* has been some time coming. Dominique Thorne plays genius inventor Riri Williams, last seen wearing her Iron Man-esque suit in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*.

Now she has been expelled from MIT and returns to Chicago to find her world rocked by Anthony Ramos's the Hood, a petty criminal who helps Williams make some money through morally dubious means. In the comics, the Hood acquires magical powers, and reports have signalled the series will have a thematic throughline of technology versus magic.

Intriguingly, comedian Sacha Baron Cohen (*Borat*) has been attached to a mysterious role, speculated to be the villainous Mephisto.

THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS

Release date: 25 July
Director: Matt Shakman

First Steps sees the Fab Four – Pedro Pascal's Reed Richards, Vanessa Kirby's Sue Storm, Joseph Quinn's Johnny Storm, and Ebon Moss-Bachrach's the Thing – protecting Earth from the incoming world-eater, Galactus, voiced by Ralph Ineson, as forewarned to the group by Julia Garner's Silver Surfer.

But why aren't any Avengers helping them? "We're building a new universe where there are no other heroes," director Matt Shakman teased. Indeed, the movie takes place in an alternate universe where everything has a '60s retro-futuristic aesthetic. Chances are they will join the Avengers on Earth-616 and Robert Downey Jr's Doctor Doom may have something to do with it...

CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD

Release date: 14 February ★ **Director:** Julius Onah

The fourth *Captain America* sees Anthony Mackie's Sam Wilson wear the red, white and blue on the big screen. Multiple reports have signalled *Brave New World* went through significant reshoots. However, the results look thrilling; a sequel to *Falcon And The Winter Soldier* that also acts as a follow-up to the long-forgotten *The Incredible Hulk*. Yes, really.

Both Liv Tyler's Betty Ross and Tim Blake Nelson's Leader return, while Harrison Ford replaces William Hurt as President Thaddeus Ross, who will transform into the terrifying Red Hulk. "Just when I think my nerdy life can't get more complete, I heard Harrison Ford say adamantium," Kevin Feige told San Diego Comic-Con's Hall H. Let's hulking go!

Anthony Mackie shields up as Captain America.

FUTURE PROJECTS

With ***Blade*** and ***Armour Wars*** having previously been taken off the release schedule (potentially to fill one of the studio's untitled dates), Marvel has been a little more coy about announcing projects prematurely. However, we do know that work has been ongoing on a Vision Disney+ series from ***Star Trek: Picard***'s Terry Matalas, a spin-off show about ***Black Panther***'s Okoyo, and a Nova series (though this may end up being a movie) from ***Moon Knight*** scribe Sabir Pirzada. Meanwhile, Denzel Washington has let slip that he's in negotiations to appear in ***Black Panther 3***, ***Shang-Chi 2*** has been on the docket since the first one's release, and an X-Men movie – reportedly from ***The Hunger Games: The Ballad Of Songbirds & Snakes*** writer Michael Lesslie – seems imminent after ***Secret Wars***. That's all to say that, after the solitary release of ***Deadpool & Wolverine*** in cinemas last year, Marvel's release schedule is ramping up again, and won't be slowing down any time soon.

The Lion (centre) in *Eyes Of Wakanda*.

Robert Downey Jr is... Doctor Doom? Say what now?

JESSE GRANT/GETTY

★★★★★

EYES OF WAKANDA

Release date: 6 August
Episode count: Four

Marvel's animated series have generally not taken place on the Sacred Timeline – until now. *Eyes Of Wakanda* focuses on the Wakandan warriors who, throughout history, ventured around the world to recover stolen vibranium artefacts.

Head writer Todd Harris has teased that the series will showcase "unbeknownst characters in the Marvel Universe that also are from secret cities, whose name also are a title, and they have a glowing fist". Just don't expect Finn Jones, who previously played Iron Fist in the Netflix series, to return.

★★★★★

MARVEL ZOMBIES

Release date: October
Episode count: Four

A spin-off from *What If...?*, *Marvel Zombies* brings back every beloved character you can think of in undead form. The series has a TV-MA (for mature audiences) rating and will feature all the "gore and splatter you want from a zombie show".

Iman Vellani, who returns as (an alive) Ms Marvel/Kamala Khan, has said her character is at the show's centre. Those joining her fight against the walking dead include Yelena, Kate Bishop, Jimmy Woo, Death Dealer, Shang-Chi and Kamala Khan.

Meanwhile, you can expect zombified versions of Hawkeye, Abomination, Captain America, Captain Marvel, Scarlet Witch, Okoye, and *Eternals*' Ikaris.

★★★★★

WONDER MAN

Release date: December
Episode count: TBA

Despite *Wonder Man* having been long rumoured to be in production, Marvel decided not to announce the series at a Comic-Con or D23, but with a teaser tucked inside a Disney+ trailer.

Yahya Abdul-Mateen II plays Simon Williams, an actor with superpowers who auditions for the lead role in a superhero show. Ben Kingsley's Trevor Slattery lends Williams a helping hand, as does his agent, Ed Harris's Neal Saroyan. *Wonder Man* is set to be a limited series, with *Shang-Chi* helmer Destin Daniel Cretton acting as co-creator and director of the first two episodes.

★★★★★

AVENGERS: DOOMSDAY

Release date: 1 May 2026
Directors: The Russo brothers

Originally subtitled *The Kang Dynasty*, the next *Avengers* storyline has been hard-pivoted to focus on Downey's Doctor Doom. The actor previously played Iron Man in the MCU, making his casting somewhat baffling unless Doom is a Tony Stark variant from another universe – presumably the one Fantastic Four takes place in.

Reports have indicated Chris Evans, formerly Captain America, may also return. Whatever the case, the Russo brothers are excited to be back, telling our sister site GamesRadar+: "Why would we come back if we didn't feel like we had a story that had that possibility of being on an equal footing with *Infinity War* and *Endgame* – unless there's a kernel there for an idea that's really explosive?"

★★★★★

SPIDER-MAN 4

Release date: 24 July 2026
Director: Destin Daniel Cretton

Sony announced *Spider-Man 4*'s official release date in October 2024, with Tom Holland confirming production would begin mid-2025. While plot details are under wraps, we last saw Peter Parker's alternate identity being erased from his friends' memories by Doctor Strange in *No Way Home*.

There have been suggestions online that Matt Murdock and Kingpin could play key parts in the story. However, with *Spider-Man 4* releasing after *Doomsday*, it would seem strange not to see Parker being affected by Downey's Doom somehow making an appearance in his world.

★★★★★

AVENGERS: SECRET WARS

Release date: 7 May 2027
Directors: The Russo brothers

The most anticipated movie in Marvel's collection – and for good reason. There have previously been two different *Secret Wars* storylines in the comics: the first saw the Beyonder bring together heroes and villains from various universes to fight each other on a planet known as Battleworld; the second centred on two universes colliding in an incursion.

Secret Wars previously seemed destined to be more aligned with that second version, yet with the Russos on board, that may have changed. "Our love for Marvel is based on the books that we read as kids, the books that we fell in love with," they previously said. "The one series we adored growing up was *Secret Wars*."

Whatever happens, expect cameos galore from Marvel's past and present.

Designing AGATHA ALL ALONG

COSTUME DESIGNER DANIEL SELON HAS WORKED ON THE LOOK OF ALL THINGS WANDA MAXIMOFF-RELATED SINCE *WANDAVISION* – BUT *AGATHA ALL ALONG* HAS TAKEN THE FAMILY AFFAIR DOWN AN ALL-NEW PATH

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

AGATHA'S COAT

You sit down and think, "She needs some kind of vehicle – hero garb that will carry her through and is both contemporary and fantasy and pushes the boundaries of which period it is" – and it was the coat. I always knew that it was going to be this long travelling coat, I came to my pitch with that idea.

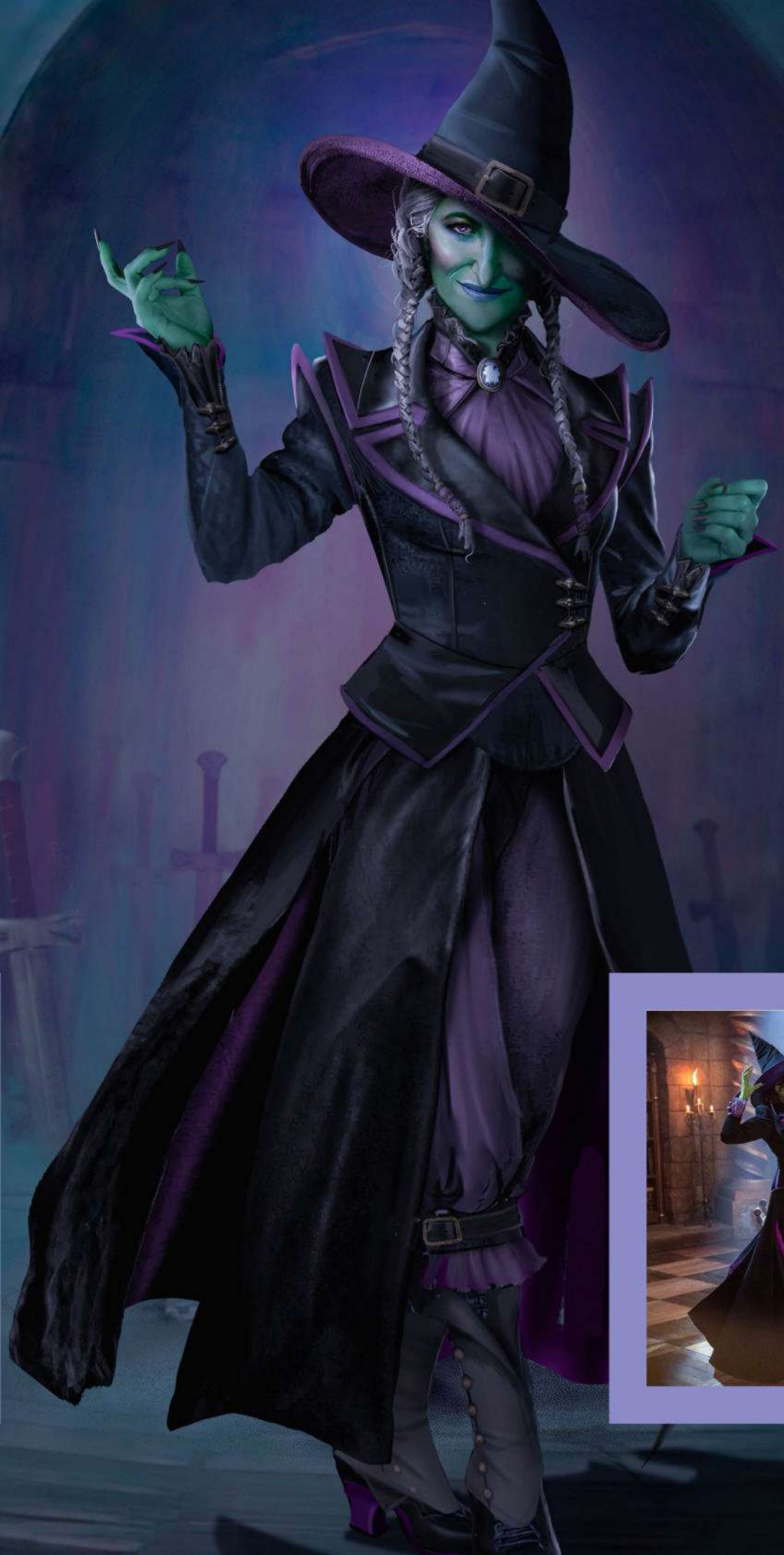
I look at costume design as an external expression of the character's internal experience. So in this case, Agatha's coat is this protective layer. It's a bit mysterious, it covers her up, it feminises her, it makes her more masculine. It's all of the things that she's experiencing on the inside: duplicitousness. There is a mercurial quality to her and you get these glimpses of this wild lining that we designed because that's all you get with her, flashes of being spectacular, or of warmth or of a terrifying, scary lady, but throughout, she's classy. She's got style, she's got panache, and she's magnetic. That coat really was able to help her embody all of those things. It distills it into a physical piece of art that she can wear and utilise like a tool.

It's very important to put effort into the costume, whichever ways you can, that will only be for the makers and the actor. It gives an importance to the thing. This idea of creating/aligning was born out of the fact that we had made some rune art with my graphic designer that was based on Nordic samples. I just thought it was so beautiful, so interesting, we needed to do something with it. I said, let's create it around these themes of Agatha, character, consumption, deception, mentorship, grief and loss and beguilement.

We took our initial graphic art, and broke that out into these five different runes, and then I came up with this story. Kathryn [Hahn] and I had been chatting about her being a lone crow, that she's this covenless witch, so bringing in elements of the bird, of the angularity of their feathers, of their shoulders, the way they turn their head – you're always catching a crow in silhouette.

We brought the image of the crow into the back of the lining. So it's this murmuration of crows gathering at her shoulders, and then they drop down the small of her back. As they travel down, they transform into the runes, and the runes are placed from left to right, so it tells the story of her journey in the show.

Costume designer Daniel Selon with the coat.



AGATHA THE BAD WITCH

The looks in episode seven, we had to use the image and the idea of the original costumes from the 1939 film *The Wizard Of Oz*, and be inspired by that, so that she would be recognisable instantly. But we also couldn't just copy it, and we didn't want to, and we had to get approval from multiple entities to really buy off on our design.

I went back and read the original L Frank Baum book – there was a little bit of silhouette that was implied. There are some stars and symbols that are drawn onto her costume in the book that we brought in, and we knew that we had to use Agatha's purple.

By that point in the story she's so spiny and sharp. She's really nearing the end and she's got her claws out, so I wanted everything to have angles.

We created this collar that's actually wired so that the points of it literally poke up and are pointing up at the sky. It just took things to a new place for Kathryn and she just goes with it.

COSTUME DESIGNS: DANIEL SELON. COSTUME CONCEPT ART: GREG HOPWOOD. IMOGENE CHAYES. PHOTOGRAPHY: CHUCK ZLOTNICK © MARVEL

Kathryn Hahn as "Bad Witch" Agatha.

TEEN/WICCAN

We really designed both of his looks side by side so that we could craft a visual journey from the mysterious character of Teen. We knew that we needed to get to his Wiccan look. But we didn't want that to be what I call 100% "super suit". Typically in the MCU there's a lot of sculpted, moulded elements on the superhero suits, and there's a lot of synthetic fibres used. We knew that we wanted him to have an expression of his power at the end of the piece, but not be all the way, and give him somewhere to go.

So side by side, we illustrated his jeans when he's Teen [with] scrawled pen doodles on the sides. When he becomes Wiccan, that will transform and become the scattershot of stars that trims the side of his suit, which is something that's in the comics. So I definitely turn to the comics for inspiration and a touch point for the visual language and the shape language.

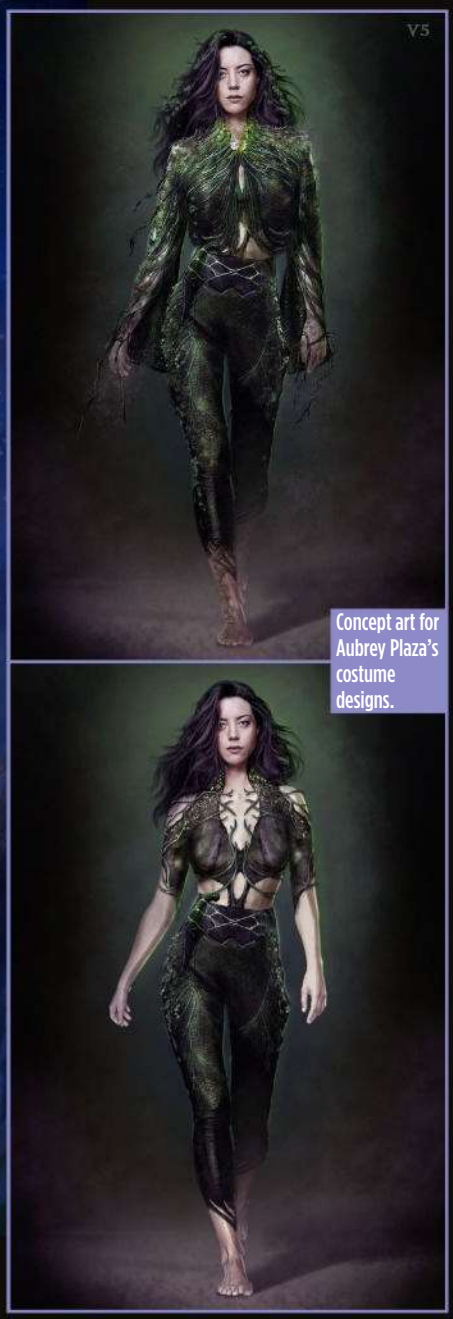
His cape is iconically asymmetrical, which was such a fun thing to drape, and has all of this wonderful drama. It's not a very full cape. It's narrow, long and lean, like Joe [Locke]. I thought, "If we have this runway, what do we do with it?" So we put the runes and the texture from the Scarlet Witch costume all over the outside and Vision's graphic design, lots of circuits and digital pathways, on the inside, which is also incredibly challenging to screenprint on both sides, but we did it.

Lady Death (Aubrey Plaza): looks to die for.

LADY DEATH

There's so many costumes in this story that I'm proud of, but I really love the Lady Death costume, and how we were able to bring some really original ideas to a character that exists a little bit in the comics and land her just in the sweet spot of sort of dark, mysterious, dangerous, haunting, seductive.

With these 1920s cocoon coat period references, it was such a fun way to interpret the classic look of Death. Instead of holding a scythe, she's got her sexy little dagger. Aubrey [Plaza], she just carries it so well, and she plays the character with her inimitable



Concept art for Aubrey Plaza's costume designs.

style and dry characterisation. It was such a beautiful marriage, I think, of our costume ideas and her performance. I love it.

Aubrey had such great ideas about her character. She was so open. She's such an incredible collaborator. She just always wanted to know what I had been thinking about the character and then we would come together on the ideas and really spend some time in the fitting room, putting it into her body and feeling it out and figuring out what it was that we wanted to do.

GHOST AGATHA

Ghost Agatha was an intense challenge because we knew that we wanted to bring in some of the practical elements that were a big part of this show. We worked with this company in Italy called DreamLux. They do this incredible thing where they weave glass fibre, optic fibres, into organza. We had them specifically create fabric that would be the under-layer of the Ghost Agatha dress, so that she actually embodied light.

My idea was that when she dies, she comes back as pure electricity and energy. We wanted to represent that in a way that would be captivating and beautiful, like a stained glass window. So we created this stained glass window motif on her bodice, and I wanted to light it from the inside. We even created the cameo that she iconically wears with all of her looks.

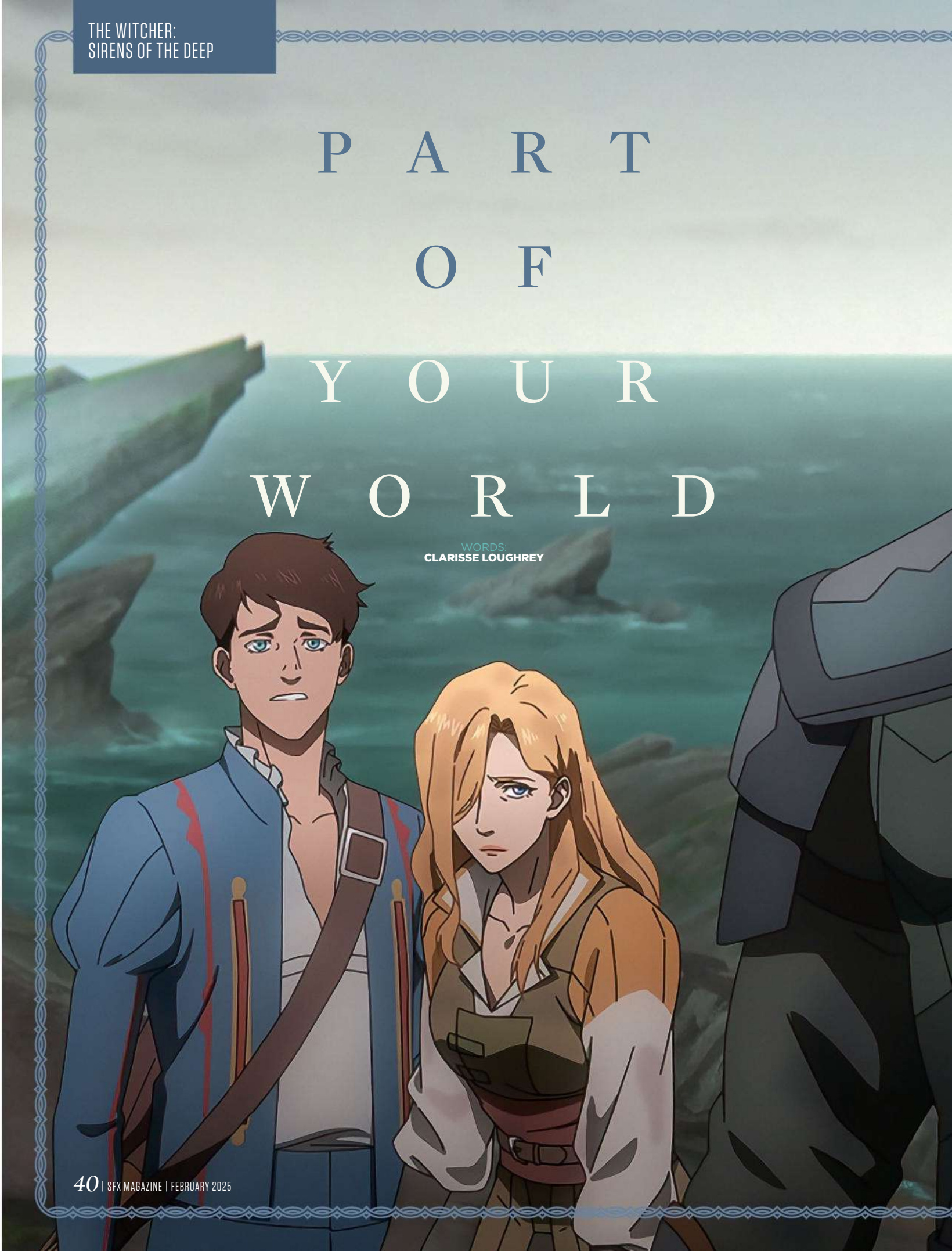
We made a clear version of it in glass so that we could light it from behind. It's actually controlled in the moment on camera with a lighting board. When she picks up the cameo and puts it on, it's magnetised, and then it lights up. We really went all the way to take her super-witch look from *WandaVision*, lay it to rest with the kiss of Death and Rio, then when we see her again she's reborn, and it's elevated, it's ascended, and there's a lightness to it, and that she's floating and she's transparent, and it feels airy and ethereal.

We have to hide battery packs and light sources, which actually get very hot, and so until the technology improves, Kathryn was literally running around with little heaters all over her back and hanging from her hips.

Agatha All Along is on Disney+. Agatha All Along: The Art Of The Series by Jess Harrold is published by Penguin in April.

PART OF YOUR WORLD

WORDS:
CLARISSE LOUGHREY



Geralt and Jaskier rock up in yet another town.

IMAGINE IF IN HANS CHRISTIAN Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, when its heroine is asked to trade in her voice for legs so she can woo her mortal infatuation on shore, she simply barked back: "Well, why can't the prince grow a tail instead?"

Novelist Andrzej Sapkowski, in his tales of the Witcher, has delighted in turning fairy tale presumptions on their head, wielding a searing-hot poker against the kinds of cultural norms they enforce – chivalrous knights, feral creatures, wilting maidens.

In his short story "A Little Sacrifice", taken from the 1992 collection *Sword Of Destiny*, monster slayer Geralt is hired to translate Duke Agloval's marriage proposition to Sh'eenaz, a ferociously beautiful mermaid, into her own deep-sea dialect. She refuses to drink the potion that will turn her tail into limbs. He won't undergo the witch's spell to turn his limbs into a tail. The would-be lovers have reached a stalemate, and Geralt is left without his due payment. Frankly it's every freelancer's worst nightmare.

Now, finally, Sapkowski's "A Little Sacrifice" will grace the small screen, thanks to Netflix's new feature-length anime adaptation *The Witcher: Sirens Of The Deep*. The story's a long-time favourite of the show's writers' room, according to executive producer Mike Ostrowski, who's worked on the series since season one and co-wrote *Sirens Of The Deep* with Rae Benjamin.

Season one bore the mighty task of condensing *Sword Of Destiny* and 1993's *The Last Wish*, both short story collections preluding Sapkowski's main Witcher saga, into eight episodes of streamlined, continuous narrative. "A Little Sacrifice" failed to make the cut. But, while these self-contained adventures tended to send Geralt off on his lonesome (well, plus his faithful bard companion Dandelion, known as Jaskier in the original Polish), executive producer Lauren Schmidt

O MUSE! SING IN ME

How *Sirens Of The Deep* reveals its musical side

"I feel like whenever I write an episode, I try to sneak in a song," says writer Rae Benjamin. "It's very fun." Fans of Jaskier's ditties (and who isn't?) will be overjoyed to hear that there's a musical component to *Sirens Of The Deep*.

Yet the real, hardcore Jaskierites, as it were, will know that the film's story had already previously been teased in the main series. In episode four of season three, Jaskier (Joey Batey) sings to Ciri (Freya Allan) a song titled "A Little Sacrifice", while she drifts off to sleep. Two episodes later, as she wanders the desert at night, she sings to herself these lyrics:

"At lengths did they try to agree
Who'd forfeit their environ.
For if yer goal be Paradise,
Ponder all yer wants in life,
and make A Little Sacrifice."

"Matt D'Ambrosio, who wrote the song," writer Mike Ostrowski says, "this was his favourite short story. He would always talk about, how do we get Essi Daven in? How do we figure this out?

"He also happens to be a wonderful lyricist, and so wrote the full song. It's just a beautifully written song. Joe Trapanese wrote the music to it. It was this nice thing that we were able to slot in."

Hissrich explains that they're still key to understanding "what the Continent is: the politics, the climate, what Witchers are, why they're important."

So the prospect of a follow-up to 2021's anime film *The Witcher: Nightmare Of The Wolf*, which focused on the origins of Geralt's mentor Vesemir, offered up the chance to mix a little extra spice into this world.

"We remain faithful to the short story," explains Benjamin, who's worked on the series since season two. "But we just had to expand it to make a movie. We wanted to make sure that we maintained the essence of it and added more." A firmer resolution has been written, and its events are a little more grounded in the main series' narrative.

The simple reason why we've never seen "A Little Sacrifice" in live action is because, as Ostrowski points out, "Water is death, you know?" Unless your name is James Cameron, or you can click your fingers and have all of Hollywood's finances at your command, any world beneath the waves presents a near-impossible challenge for filmmakers. "And we didn't want to cheap out," stresses Hissrich. This story meant a lot to *The Witcher* team and it was important to do right by it – to invite audiences into a fully conceived merworld, inhabited by merpeople, who speak their own merlanguage. They wanted to envision new beasts, some mentioned by Sapkowski, others entirely of their own invention.

"Being that this was animated," says Benjamin, "we took full advantage of making these merpeople feel different. They're not your traditional depiction of mermaids – you know, a human-looking person with a tail.

"We wanted to make something that you haven't necessarily seen in other movies and TV shows, and really make it as heightened as possible. There aren't any budget constraints, there aren't any visual effects constraints. We wanted to dive into that world and make it as unique as possible."

They found their imaginations fully nurtured and facilitated by Studio Mir, the South Korean animation studio who worked

> **"We wanted to make something that you haven't necessarily seen in other movies"**

on *Nightmare Of The Wolf*, Nickelodeon's *The Legend Of Korra* and Disney's *X-Men '97*. "Studio Mir is incredibly collaborative," Hissrich says. "It would have been very easy for them to say, 'Great, you've written the script. It's ours. Thank you.' Instead they were willing, even with me, to send things. They were so lovely and so patient. And [the film's director, Kang Hei Chul] was fantastic."

"When we started *Nightmare Of The Wolf*, I knew nothing about anime," she continues. "My eight-year-old son was like, 'Okay, let me try to explain to you what this is, because it's a very different style of writing.' So Beau DeMayo, who wrote that one, Rae, and Mike – we all had to study how these films were written. They're written in a very different way →

There are murmurings among the merpeople.

THE PAGEMASTER

How *The Witcher* keeps its ties to author Andrzej Sapkowski

The Witcher is unique in its relationship to its source author, Andrzej Sapkowski. "We keep him on as a creative consultant for *Witcher* projects," explains executive producer Lauren Schmidt Hissrich. "At the very beginning of the project, we had a very close relationship because, to me, it was really about understanding why he wrote these books in the first place, the things that were important to him."

"I was so curious because the women in the books are very strong. It's not something that you see in a lot of '80s fantasy literature. I was curious where that came from. So we would have a ton of conversations. When we started season one, he would get all of the dailies, he would see the cuts. Then he came to Budapest to visit us on set, and said he no longer wanted to receive anything.

"I was like, 'Whoa, whoa, what's wrong?' He gave me this great analogy where he was like, 'Listen, I want to enjoy the soup. I don't want to go buy the groceries. I don't want to chop the vegetables. I don't want to do any of that legwork, because I would prefer to watch it and enjoy it at the end.'

"He watches them on Netflix like any fan would, and that's incredible to me. We keep up with him. He comes to the read-throughs. You know, he is still a presence in the show, for sure, but he would rather be a fan."

to a standard feature, and certainly a television show."

Sirens Of The Deep is set between episodes five and six of *The Witcher*'s first season. At this point, Geralt and his sorceress love Yennefer are, as Ostrowski describes, in "a period of not being together, or a period of trouble, but still on each other's minds." As we know, they've already hooked up and parted ways in quick succession, following Yennefer's frustrated attempt to turn her body into a djinn's vessel (a hell of a first date), but are yet to reunite during the hunt for the green dragon.

This main timeline has been left untouched, aside from a few "Easter eggs for the fans" – Benjamin excitedly notes that she and Ostrowski were able to sneak in a new version of a "fun little scene" cut from the main series. But *Sirens Of The Deep* lets us soak a little in Geralt's state of mind during that period of absence.

"Geralt cannot let Yennefer go, even though he's trying his best," Ostrowski says. "She haunts him. Even if he wanted to be rid of her, he can't." While "he still thinks humans are the worst monsters, despite his best intentions, he can't help but get involved."

> **"We thought this was a great way to pay homage to how Geralt was after he met Yennefer"**

It's that impulse that not only lands him in the middle of a human-merpeople diplomatic incident, but right into the affections of one Essi Daven (voiced by Christina Wren). She's an old friend of Jaskier's, a fellow bard who falls head over heels for our monosyllabic hero.

According to Benjamin, she is, in many ways, Yennefer's perfect opposite: blonde hair in the place of raven locks; "bubbly, bright, and very extroverted" where the other is as "brooding and tortured" as they come. To Ostrowski, she represents "the road not taken", someone who "on its face, makes more sense than Yen."

According to Hissrich, as they headed into seasons two and three of the main series a decision was made in the writers' room that "Geralt would never really stray from Yen again". However, in Sapkowski's books "Geralt is all over the place. He falls in love with Yen, but then he's still gallivanting around the countryside, meeting other women, having adventures with Jaskier.

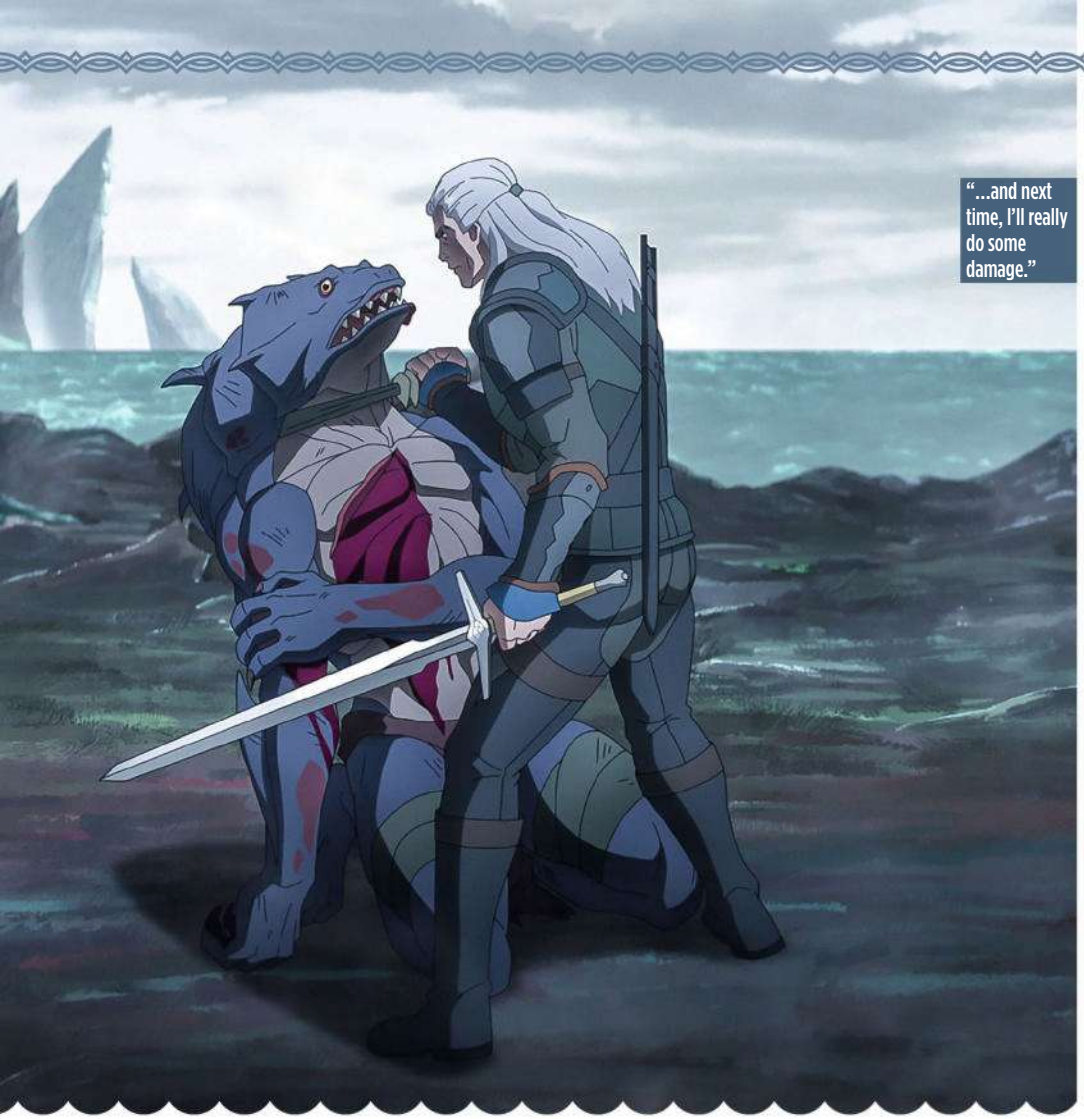
"So we thought this was a great way to pay homage to how Geralt was after he met Yen, but before they became what we now know them as, which is lovers who have become each other's family."

Essie's arrival also offers the chance to dig deeper into our bard's past, to reveal what Ostrowski teases as "something about Jaskier that may not be known". An initial clip, released last September as part of Netflix's Geeked Week 2024, revealed that Jaskier's not actually from Oxenfurt, as was assumed.

Not only is Joey Batey back to voice the character, but he's also joined by Anya Chalotra as the voice of Yennefer. "Hearing Joey's voice and hearing Anya's voice – it always feels like home," Ostrowski adds. "It's so good just to have them in it."

What, then, does it feel like to hear Doug Cockle's voice as *Sirens Of The Deep*'s Geralt? For gamers, it's likely the fond reminiscence of the hours – tens? Hundreds? Thousands? – spent hacking at monsters and traversing the landscape on a faithful steed named Roach, in any or all of the three *Witcher* games Cockle

Look at those quads... impressive work.



"...and next time, I'll really do some damage."

has lent his voice to (he'll also feature in the planned fourth instalment). "Having heard the way Doug does it, it's really interesting to feel like, 'Oh yeah, this is Geralt.' At the same time, it's a slight twist on what we know about Geralt, or what we think about Geralt," says Ostrowski.

Hissrich befriended Cockle during the initial roll-out of Netflix's *The Witcher*. They'd connected on social media, bonded by shared experience. "There are very few people who understand what it's like to take something that's so beloved and then attach your name to it, and start changing things that may make people really happy, that may make people really mad," she explains. "A Little Sacrifice" was one of Cockle's favourite stories, too. She sent him a script. It was an immediate yes.

While *The Witcher* awaits Liam Hemsworth's debut in the role of Geralt, following Henry Cavill's departure from the series, here was an opportune chance to finally tether together onscreen the kind of harmonious relationship between the series, books and games that had quietly been fostered behind the scenes.

"Nothing had brought all of these pieces together yet," Hissrich says. "This is the first time we've really been able to do that." And they blend with ease, since all Witcher stories beat with the same heart and ask the same questions.

"What happens to those who don't belong?" Hissrich offers. "What is the plight of the other? In 'A Little Sacrifice' it's obviously the merpeople and the vodniks, but I think it's the humans just as much.

"That's why I love the story of Essi and Jaskier growing up together, and how they both were on the fringes as well." Feet or tail, fin or finger, every creature just wants to find its place in the world.

Remember: silver sword for the monsters.

Time to activate the Witcher senses!

The Witcher: Sirens Of The Deep is on Netflix from 11 February.

THE LORE-AX

How Lauren Schmidt Hissrich became a guardian of the Continent

KARWAI TANG/WIREIMAGE/GETTY

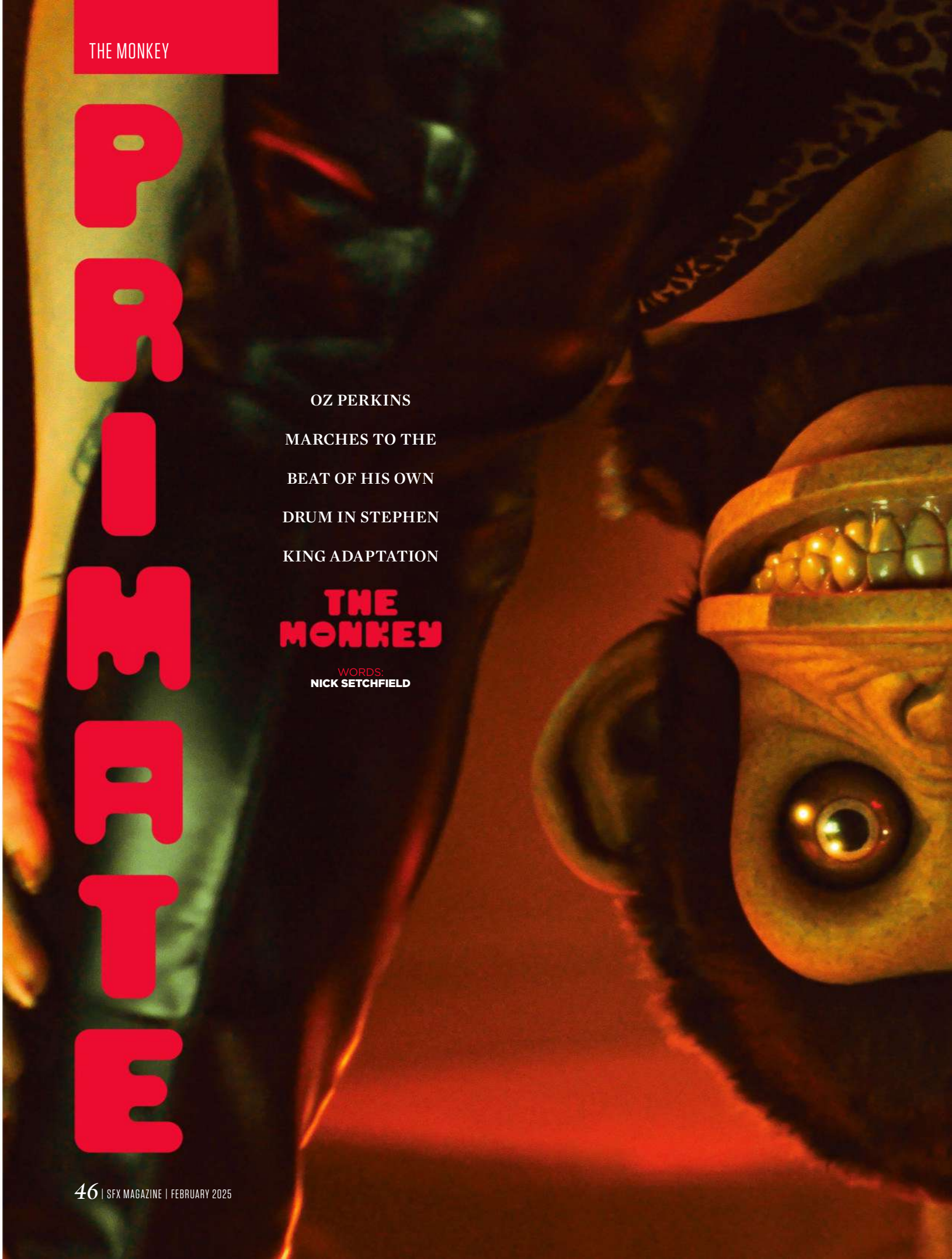
Star Wars may have its Lucasfilm Story Group, carefully cataloguing and maintaining the boundaries of its universe, but when it comes to television's *The Witcher*? "There is no group of people, there is me!" answers executive producer Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, with a chuckle. "But, thank god, I love this world. I'm constantly looking for other opportunities to expand it outside of the main mothership show.

"I will never forget Kelly Luegenbiehl, who was the Netflix executive at the time, who sold the show with me. It was maybe about a month before the show launched on Netflix, and I came to her and I said, 'I'm having all of these ideas about spin-offs.' She was like, 'Cool. Let's see if anyone watches the show.' Because, of course, you never know."

"As soon as it did, as soon as we were able to start looking at who was watching it, who cared about it, who wanted more – one of the things I felt most strongly about, and it's not a surprise to anyone, is that the female characters really found an audience. I think it found a lot of people who felt marginalised from fantasy shows in the past.

"So that's where my head went first. How do we pick out stories that, to me, are going to continue to broaden this universe? This world is so enormous. We made a conscious decision to end the live-action show after season five, where the books ended. We felt very strongly about that, but it doesn't mean that all Witcher storytelling has to be done."

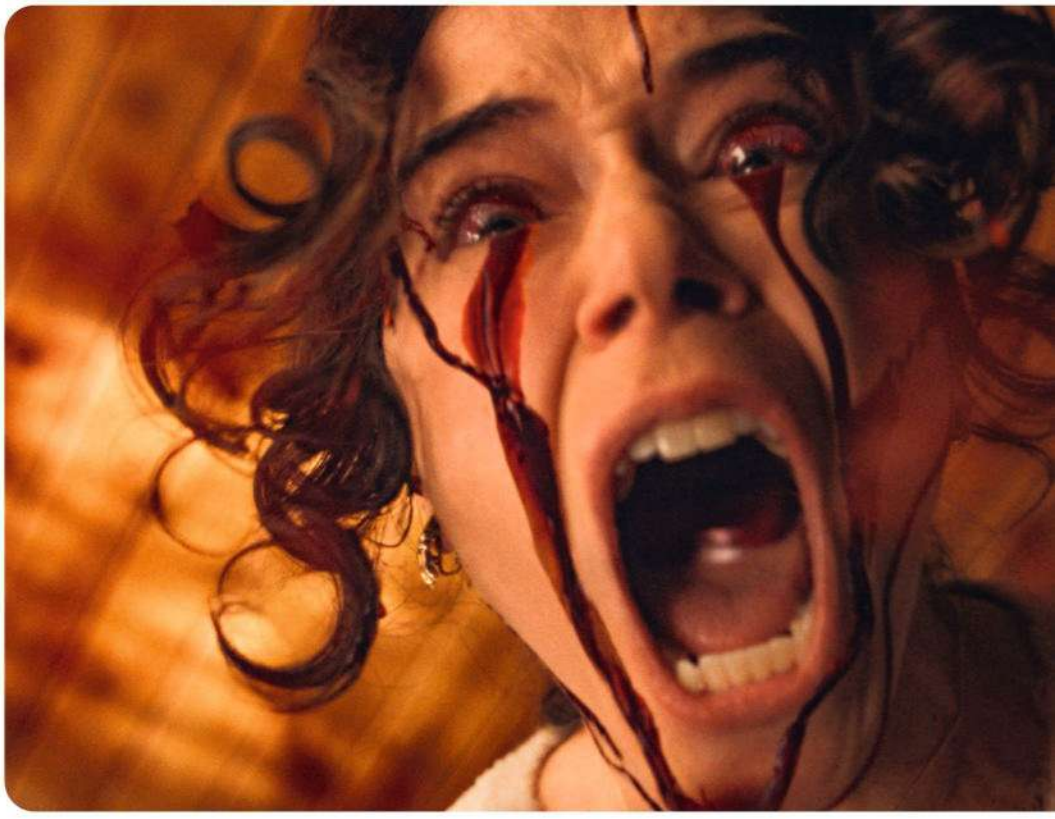
PREMIERE



OZ PERKINS MARCHES TO THE BEAT OF HIS OWN DRUM IN STEPHEN KING ADAPTATION THE MONKEY

WORDS:
NICK SETCHFIELD

SUSPECT



EVERYBODY DIES.

No, that's not a nuclear-level spoiler – unless you have a seriously underdeveloped sense of mortality, that is. For Oz Perkins it's both a reality check and the creative engine of *The Monkey*, his take on one of Stephen King's most primally unsettling tales.

"Everybody will die," the writer and director gently reminds *SFX*. "It's said in the movie: you'll die, I'll die, all your friends will die, all your parents, all their parents, your pets... Everybody dies, and the basic madness of that concept became the root of the movie."

For Perkins a King adaptation is a kind of homecoming. "In my childhood Stephen King was definitely something that haunted the spaces," he recalls, summoning the "imprinted memory" of the *Pet Sematary* cover – "The snarling cat face!" – and a summer spent at Cape Cod, reading *Misery* with his father, screen icon Anthony Perkins. "I would read a chapter and then I'd pass it over to him, and he'd read some. We went back and forth. So that became important to me."

Part of King's 1985 collection *Skeleton Crew*, "The Monkey" is a story with the power to scar your dreams. In a family attic a man named Hal Sheldon unearths an unwelcome totem of his childhood, a cymbal-clashing clockwork chimp with glazed eyes, moth-eaten fur and "huge gleeful teeth". For Hal and his twin brother Bill this toy is a cursed object, one whose malevolent presence seemingly triggered a spate of mysterious deaths.

Defying all attempts to dispose of it, the mangy curio continues to haunt Hal's life, "grinning its old familiar grin" – just as King's tale embedded itself in the furthest, darkest eaves of readers' minds.

While the short story has a steady, inescapable chill, Perkins – who recently scored a box-office hit with serial killer horror *Longlegs* – opted for a different tone. If there's a lighter side to "Everybody dies" he's out to find it.

TOY STORY

"I took a playful horror shine to it right away," he shares. "That was important to me from the get-go with this project, that it wasn't going to be dreadfully sombre. It was going to be more comedic, and cosy, which I think seemed correct for a movie about a toy. I wanted to steer away from the more serious movies about possessed toys, which don't ring true for me."

But that's not to undercut the sinister mojo of the monkey itself. "When you see the monkey or feel the monkey it's like, 'Oh no, not that horrible thing!' So I have that. That's pre-existing.

"What I don't need to do is then goose that, because that's already laid in. Instead I can add a layer of warm, redemptive, father-son road trip comedy, which just gives the thing a more robust life and becomes more interesting to me, more textured. I hope everybody goes into it with dread and carries their dread around with them, but is also happy to have a laugh.

> **"I've never had a demonic monkey toy but I have suffered insane losses in my life"**

"There's a lot of patent ridiculousness to it," Perkins continues. "I'm a fan of things like *Looney Tunes* and *The Simpsons* and *Tom And Jerry*, where it's irreverent and somewhat violent and aggressive in tone. It's rough, but it's funny. I mean, poor Daffy Duck is always getting his face blown sideways by shotguns, but then he collects himself and is ready for the next joke. I like that rhythm, that Chuck Jones sophistication. I think Chuck Jones and John Landis are probably the two titans that look over this movie."

Perkins also found a more profound – and personally resonant – connection to the source material. "I felt like well, I'm not going to write a movie that's the short story, because the short story doesn't suggest a whole movie. It's a little bit sparser than that. It's a *short* story. So it's my job to say, 'What's the thing here that makes it a movie, and a fresh movie, not a retread of a short story from, let's face it, 40-plus years ago?'

"It has to be about me. It has to be about something that's true for me. Now I've never had a demonic monkey toy that did terrible things but I have suffered insane losses in my life. Both the loss of my mother in September 11 [Berry Berenson was a passenger on American Airlines Flight 11] and the loss of my movie star father to AIDS were deeply shocking. Just in terms of the 'Oh, really? *That's* what happened?' madness of it all, I felt like I should make a movie about that experience – which then immediately said, 'Well, it should be a comedy.'

"I'm not going to make a dour movie, a profoundly maudlin picture, when I have a funny toy monkey at the centre of it. I think you can be funny and sweet and cartoonish and soulful – it's a very soulful picture – but I felt that ultimately the tone of it was going to be much more breezy, and healing, as opposed to down in the dumps. I felt like it was going to be redemptive. Early on the slogan for the picture became 'Everybody dies, and that's life.'"

Does Perkins see the film's humour as a defence against darkness? "No, I feel like it's an acceptance of death," he states, simply. 'It's saying 'That's what it is.' We can either freak out or we can do our best, and dance a little.

Theo James plays both Hal and Bill Sheldon.

STOCK IMAGES: PIALHOVIK/GETTY

Eye caramba! Tatiana Maslany is in trouble.

Elijah Wood (centre) isn't going down too well...

I think it's acceptance, which I wouldn't have been able to do 20 years ago. I'm 50 now and life has changed. Things heal. You feel different."

The design of the monkey itself was crucial, bringing to the screen the indelibly baleful image conjured by King's prose. "I wanted it to be as familiar as it could be," Perkins tells *SFX*. "I wanted it to not deviate from what people expect it to look like. It's got the face. It has the eyes. It wears the little red vest, it has the little striped pants. To me all those things were very classical.

"I didn't feel the need to update anything, because I wanted people to carry with them a sort of collective unconscious feeling about this entity, which is a horror staple – it's seen in the *Conjuring* universe, it's in their museum. I wanted to ride the wave of recognition and keep it as elemental as I could. There's a few little tweaks. We gave it realistic-looking hands and feet, which I thought was sort of gross and weird."

But there's also one significant change. In King's original story the monkey smashes a pair of cymbals ("Jang-jang-jang-jang!"). In the film it beats a drum with a pair of little red drumsticks.

"When I was given the assignment, the producer said, 'Oh, by the way, Disney owns the cymbals, because of [the toy monkey in] *Toy Story*.' So it can't be cymbals. What if it was a drum? It's one of those things where a limitation becomes an opportunity. If you're making movies and you're not up for that adage then you're in real trouble!

"I was like, 'Hey, that's awesome. The drum is better.' The drum is like a marching drum. It's like, 'Drum roll, please!' before something happens. That's better than cymbals. So thanks, Disney. I prefer it!"

Hal and Bill Sheldon are both played by *The Gentlemen*'s Theo James. "I was looking for someone who's good, someone who's appealing, someone who's funny and someone who's not afraid... The model that Theo and I used was early Tom Hanks. Like, Tom Hanks in *The Money Pit*, before Tom Hanks became sort of noble. The everyman goofiness of Hanks in his early career was what we were after.

"Theo plays twin brothers, which is wild, and they're very different people. He did a beautiful job. He's wonderful, such a charming guy, so funny and so brave."

When *SFX* spoke to Perkins for the release of *Longlegs* he said he was aiming, above all, for *The Monkey* to feel like "a Stephen King film". Can he quantify that now, with the movie under his belt? Is it a tone? A vibe? A visual aesthetic? "It's all of those things. *Stranger Things* kind of cornered the market on 'It's like movies from the '80s, it's like *Gremlins*, it's like Spielberg!' Because *Stranger Things* did it so well and so successfully, it sort of took it away from the rest of us. Initially the movie that I wrote was set in the '80s, with the childhood stuff in the '50s, because that felt very Stephen King to me. But of course *It* already did that, and *Stranger Things* took that away, so we moved it to the '90s and the present.

"Leaning into the effect that these things have on childhood felt very Stephen King to me. *Pet Sematary*, *Stand By Me*, *It*, *The Shining*... Everything feels like childhood damaged, childhood trampled on. In this movie the first 30 minutes is just kids. We let the kids thing be as significant as the adult thing, which again is a gesture to *It*."

It's a Stephen King film. But this is also an Oz Perkins film. The success of *Longlegs* positioned him as one of the new auteurs of horror, a creator with a signature voice, a certain worldview. Just how do you reconcile those two sets of audience expectations?

"It's a tricky one," Perkins nods. "We've had our eye on it very closely, because *Longlegs* was so indelible and it really made its way into the bloodstream. How do you undo that, in a way, because this is so unlike that?

"For all that *Longlegs* came out of the gate as 'Oh, it's the most terrifying thing of all time! They're crying in the aisles!' I think, ultimately, people really thought it was fun. It's lived on in social media as 'It's a gas, man!' So I think if we can present *The Monkey* as well done, and fresh, the audience will forgive the fact it's not about a serial killer, and it's a bit more charming.

"The aspiration has to be to be able to make different movies. The aspiration has to be to be able to paint with different colours."

The Monkey is in cinemas from 21 February.

FAST FACT!
Grammar Rodeo was the codename for this top-secret *Star Wars* project during the shoot.

PICTURES: MATT KENNEDY © LUCASFILM LTD. STOCK IMAGES: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY

THE INSIDER GUIDE TO SKELETON

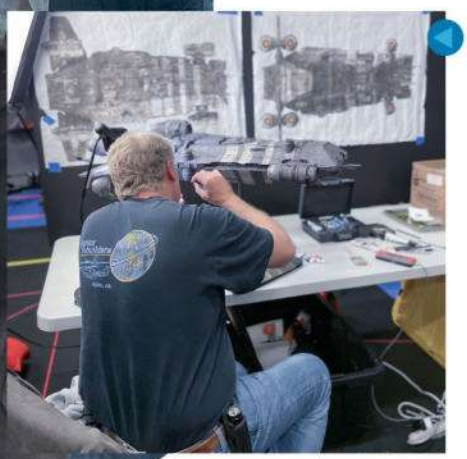
***SFX* TAKES A TRIP TO INDUSTRIAL LIGHT & MAGIC FOR A BEHIND-THE-SCENES PEEK AT**

PRACTICAL MAGIC

"In our approach to *Skeleton Crew*, we used the philosophy of using practical effects whenever possible," explains ILM Animation Supervisor Shawn Kelly. "That relates to things like the set, the ships, the props and even Neel's head. That also carries through into the camera work on the show. We try to stay true to the type of camera moves that we would see in the original *Star Wars* trilogy."

OUT OF THIS WORLD

"A big part of the show is the environments," says ILM VFX Supervisor Eddie Pasquarello. "We haven't been to any of these places before, so it was a very big challenge for us to start thinking about building these new worlds. For Port Borgo, we had some good concept art from Doug Chiang's art department. We also had a team building all of the ships in this shot, lighting them, texturing them and making them. They are all unique. These didn't exist as models from a practical standpoint, so a lot of them were built for the first time in CG."



MODEL BEHAVIOUR

The largest practical set built for the show was the interior of the Onyx Cinder, which is the heroes' ship in *Skeleton Crew*. "There is also a practical model version of the Onyx Cinder exterior, as well as a really cool matching CG version," Kelly tells *SFX*. "The practical model was built by [*Star Wars* model maker and digital artist] John Goodson. He is a legendary model builder from the ILM model shop days, who created a lot of the original ships from these old films we grew up with. In this photo, the Onyx Cinder model is sitting on a gimbal system that was built by [ILM's Executive Creative Director] John Knoll."

CREW

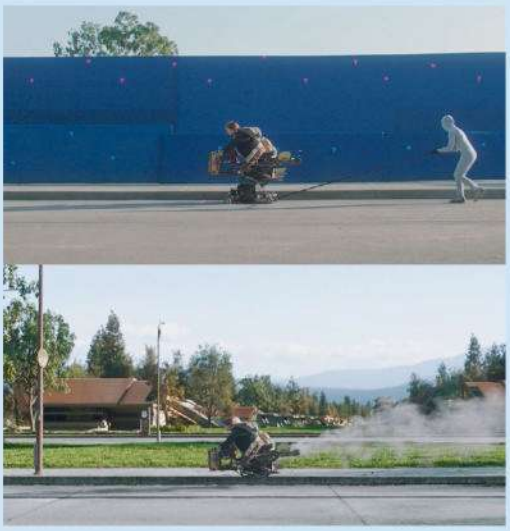
STAR WARS: SKELETON CREW... WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

CITY LIGHTS

"Creating downtown At Attin was a really Herculean effort," Pasquarello tells *SFX*. "At one point, these scenes were much more crowded and there was a lot more going on – but everyone just goes about their everyday life on the planet. At Attin is not exactly modern. It's not exactly the most polished *Star Wars* location, but it's a very pleasant place to live."

SLAB HAPPY

Many of the At Attin scenes were shot on a rather simple greenscreen backlot in California, where two concrete slabs were built alongside a small patch of grass. "The scene where Fern and KB break down on their hover bike is a good example of the slab backlot," says Pasquarello. "The girls were pushed along by a member of the show's crew. The animation team will throw in some vehicles to the finished shot and we can manipulate the girls to feel less like a guy is just pushing them on a rocking horse. Then we build this amazing environment to surround them."

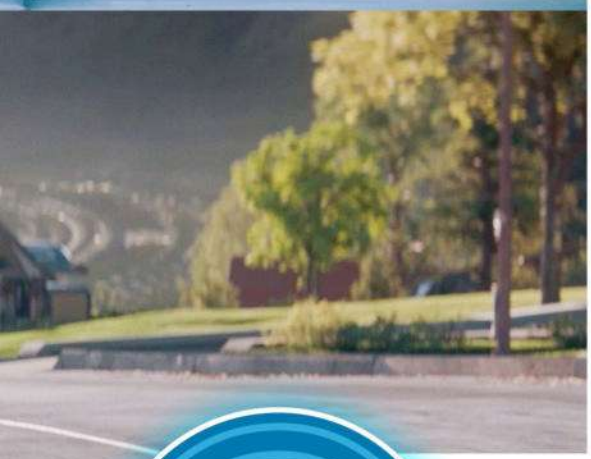


SCHOOL DAZE

In the background of an early At Attin school shot, keep your eyes open for a group of kids playing a game of "slap ball". "The idea of the game is there's a ball that floats around and it might smack you in the face if you don't get out of the way of it," explains Kelly. "We came up with a lot of different designs for how the slap ball might look. You'll see one bonking a kid in the face in an early *Skeleton Crew* scene."

STAR WARS SUBURBIA

At Attin is the name of the kids' home planet in *Skeleton Crew*. "At Attin is basically *Star Wars* suburbs," explains Pasquarello. "A lot of online commentary about the show has noted how the showrunners made this environment familiar to people and their childhood. If it was so foreign and so otherworldly, would you be able to relate to it like everyone did in the first episode? There's a charm about it, but there's also a uniqueness about it."



TEEK, TEEK... BOOM

"Teek is the taxi driver at Port Borgo," explains Kelly. "He comes from an Ewok made-for-TV film from the '80s, *Caravan Of Courage: An Ewok Adventure*. In the TV movie, he's this little guy who moves very quickly. In *Skeleton Crew*, he's a scruffy, dirty, pirate version. We looked at old reference footage from *Caravan Of Courage*, which might look a little silly, but it was really endearing and fun – especially when I was a kid. For that reason, we wanted to put a little bit of that fast movement into him in *Skeleton Crew*."

ALL HANDS ON DECK

A practical Teek puppet was created for *Skeleton Crew*. "In this shot, the puppet was placed on Fern's shoulder and he was puppeteered on set," reveals Kelly. "He's asking to get paid but he doesn't speak English, so you want to tell that story with his hand. In the finished shot, his arm is CG because we wanted to do some more delicate gestures with his fingers and hands. It was a minimal clean-up to remove the puppet's arm and replace it with our animated version."

FAST FACT!
A team of 50 animators worked on the project. "It's a global effort," explains Shawn Kelly. "They work from all over the world: San Francisco, Vancouver, Singapore, Mumbai and Sydney."

WOOD YOU?

When you see Wim racing through a forest on a hoverbike, the wild wooded area doesn't actually exist. "It was all created by our teams," reveals Kelly. "The trees are all animated. We do simulations on the leaves and we look into how the embers are going to fly around. The vortex from the engines pushes the trees around and kicks up all the dirt. It's all done by us. So much time and thought and artistry goes into the placement of each tree and the composition and timing of all the vehicles in the show."

NEEL OR

The ILM team takes a closer look at the creation of key alien character Neel

SCREEN PLAY

"Neel was a fun and interesting challenge for ILM," Pasquarello tells *SFX*. "Neel's head was built by Legacy Effects as a fully animatronic puppet. There's a screen at the front, so that the actor wearing it could breathe; you can see it just above his trunk. On set, there was a puppeteer who stood to the side of the scene controlling the puppet head. I believe we had three or four heads in total. One for Robert [Timothy Smith], who plays Neel. There was a stunt Neel and a stand-in Neel."

FACE THE FACTS

"There's been some online confusion about facial capture with Neel," adds Kelly. "On set, the young actor Robert [Timothy Smith] did have some cameras recording his facial movements. You know, the little dots on the face. The original intention was to take that facial capture footage and put it on to Neel – but as they started to film the show, everyone fell in love with how the practical puppet face worked. It's very charming. Plus, it's an incredible practical puppet and the puppeteer is amazing."

NO NEEL

FAST FACT!
Neel has teeth! "You barely ever see them, but he's definitely got them," reveals Shawn Kelly. Gnarly.

PURE AND SIMPLE

The animation team tried to keep it very simple whenever they had to make any changes to Neel's face in post-production. "Half the time, Neel is just the puppet and we didn't do anything to his face, other than erase the little breathing screen," explains Kelly. "The other half of the time, we're doing something in animation. In some scenes, we augment his trunk movement to accentuate some of the dialogue. Sometimes, we also do his brows and eyes. There are a variety of approaches, mostly based on how much we need to push the emotion of a scene."

SUDS AWAY

1 In an early *Skeleton Crew* scene, Neel gets caught in the bath when Wim sneaks over to his home. "The animation team worked on a number of different areas for this scene," Kelly tells *SFX*. "We wanted Neel to have a better interaction with the bubbles, we needed to work on his body and we wanted to help with the acting to make sure his his eyes popped open with surprise."

2 "We had never designed a body for Neel, so that was one of the things that needed to be created," adds Pasquarello. "We also struggled a little with the performance of how Neel would move the bubbles in the bath. We had footage of Neel and the puppet head in the bath, but we were having a little bit of trouble with all of this coming together. Then Shawn got sick with Covid and figured it out!"

3 "I was isolating at home and feeling better when I realised we had a bathtub similar to Neel's," admits Kelly. "It's just much smaller, but the same kind of style, so I shot some reference footage for the effects guys. I put tons of bubble bath in the bath and went for it. This was some reference footage that they could use. In the final shots, he has CG hands, arms, shoulders and chest, along with our effects bubbles."

Star Wars: Skeleton Crew is on Disney+.

LOVE-ON

WORDS:
RICHARD EDWARDS

PHOTOGRAPHY: LAURA RADFORD

TGGE

THE "DOOR TO HELL" IS THE UNLIKELY SETTING FOR ROMANCE IN THE GORGE. DIRECTOR SCOTT DERRICKSON EXPLAINS HOW HE MASHED MULTIPLE GENRES TOGETHER FOR HIS VALENTINE'S DAY ACTION-HORROR

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR A SPOT of romance this Valentine's Day, how's this for an unconventional meet cute? In new Apple TV+ movie *The Gorge*, a pair of elite snipers (played by *Top Gun: Maverick*'s Miles Teller and *Furiosa*'s Anya Taylor-Joy) are given year-long assignments at some unknown canyon in the middle of nowhere.

While their respective observation posts are situated a mere 600 metres apart, the spooky, mist-filled gorge of the film's title lies between them. Their respective paymasters have also forbidden them from talking to each other, as they carry out their lonely mission to prevent the highly classified – not to mention extremely unpleasant – contents of said valley from getting out.

Let's face it, even the vast distances and/or computer screens writer/director Nora Ephron put between Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan in hit '90s romances *Sleepless In Seattle* and *You've Got Mail* feel inconsequential next to obstacles like those.

"The only other reason they would ever have for coming in contact would be if one was hired to take out the other," *The Gorge* director Scott Derrickson tells *SFX*. "All the romantic movies that I really love, right up to my latest favourite, *Palm Springs*, have got a very unique situation for the characters to fall in love in a really unpredictable and abnormal way. I think that's at the heart of the whole film.

"That era of Nora Ephron at her peak in *You've Got Mail* and *Sleepless In Seattle*, and other romantic movies of that period were *really* wonderful – and everybody was seeing those pictures.

"But I also felt like there was something classical about this. [The script] had a *Casablanca* feel to me, the kind of pure romantic coming-together that a lot of my favourite romantic films have. I just felt like the way it was playing with genre was the kind of fresh thing that I would like to see in more big-budget filmmaking."

DIVIDE AND RULES

The nameless gorge has been under heavy surveillance for decades, with major Cold War powers, both East and West, taking responsibility for one of the two isolated guard towers. The gorge's nature and location are a closely guarded secret, but its super-important nature becomes clear as soon as genre legend Sigourney Weaver (as the enigmatic Bartholomew) recruits US military vet Levi (Teller) to guard the pit.

Besides, his predecessor JD (Sope Dirisu) describes it as "the door to Hell", which suggests he's not just going for the views – probably a good thing, seeing as they're permanently obscured by some ominous fog. Meanwhile, Lithuanian assassin Drasa (Taylor-Joy) takes up the equivalent assignment on the other side of the chasm. Before long the pair are breaking the rules, communicating via notepads, whiteboards and binoculars – like a long-distance, less creepy *Love Actually* – while showing off their respective sharp-shooting skills.

"I think what's interesting about [being an assassin] is that it's a job that would involve an awful lot of boredom, a lot of waiting," says Derrickson. "A lot of [real-life] special ops guys spend days, sometimes weeks, waiting at the exact same spot, waiting for somebody to just peek their head out. It's an incredible game of patience.

"Months go by in the movie where nothing happens regarding what's down in the gorge," he continues, "so in that boredom they connect and get to know each other. I was really impressed with the way the screenwriter, Zach [Dean, *The Tomorrow War*], introduced them to each other. I thought it was really romantic, and something that I felt like I should have seen in a movie before."

Despite their contrasting backstories, this is not a case of opposites attract. Levi and Drasa are two sides of the same coin, each one as likely as the other to be your first pick next time you assemble a team of elite assassins. Those matching, *Mr & Mrs Smith*-like skillsets are no accident. "When the action really gets started, you need to feel like these are peers, working at the highest level of this particular kind of special ops work," says Derrickson. "Otherwise, if you felt like one was better than the other, you would feel some disparity when the shit hits the fan. In the middle of the big action sequences I really wanted them to feel like they were instinctively partners because a) they had fallen in love with each other, and b) they were skilled and knew how to operate as trained soldiers."

Both stars have experience of screen action, and Derrickson brought in special ops veterans to make sure they looked the part: "There was always a specific diligence applied to the realism of how they hold their weapons, how they cross a room together, when they reload, all of that."

But *The Gorge* also presented Teller and Taylor-Joy with another, rather more unconventional challenge. Normally, when you're depicting a pair of characters falling in love, you'd expect them to be in the same room – or at least within earshot of one another. During the making of *The Gorge*, however, Teller and Joy were often filming at entirely different times.

"The tower sets were built to scale, so they're very big," the director explains. "In order to get the other person to be in a place where they could see each other, they would

Anya Taylor-Joy and Miles Teller are Drasa and Levi.

have to be looking through a real telescope at somebody on a crane far away. We started off trying that for an hour, and it was clear that it just didn't work. So I just said to both actors that we'd have to shoot this without them knowing what the other person is going to do. On occasion, when I felt like there was an important beat, I would show them dailies of how the other person had responded to something. But for the most part they were acting on their own."

While (up to now) there's been little on Derrickson's CV that screams "obvious successor to Nora Ephron", there's no question the director of *The Exorcism Of Emily Rose*, *Sinister*, *Doctor Strange* and *The Black Phone* knows his way around horror and the darker corners of cinema. As such he's ideally placed to make sure this particular "door to Hell" is suitably, well, hellish.

Arguably the third star of the movie, the gorge itself is "stitched together" from numerous real-life landscapes in Norway. The crew also took advantage of state-of-the-art Cyclops augmented reality technology to help them see what the digital backdrops would look like in real time.

But with the gorge's contents shrouded in mist (and mystery), for much of the running time the only evidence of something sinister lurking in the gloom is some freaky noises echoing across the valley.

"I heard that sound in my head when I first read the script," Derrickson explains. "I really believe that motion pictures are as much a sonic as a visual medium, and I really put a lot of work into the soundtrack – not just the music, but the sound design – of every film that I do. Probably my favourite part of filmmaking is the post-production process of bringing all the sound to the edit and getting the fullness of a cinematic experience."

As for what's actually down there... Apple has asked us to remain as tight-lipped as the guardians of the gorge, in order to prevent any spoilers from down below making it out into the open. So how do you go about creating something so dark and terrifying?

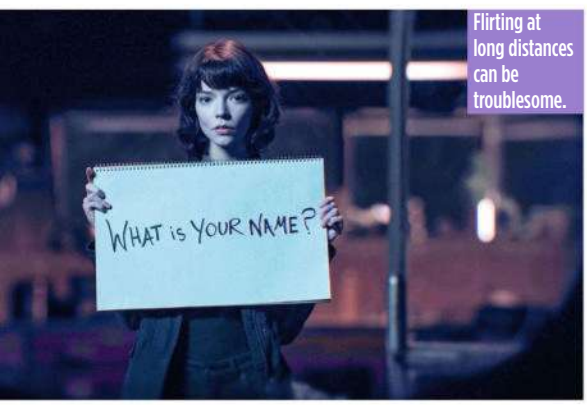
> **"When the action really gets started, you need to feel like these are peers"**

"There's a line in the trailer when [JD] says, 'The gorge is the door to Hell and we're standing guard at the gate,'" says Derrickson. "When I read that I was immediately interested. I thought, 'Okay, I'm very into the story as long as what's down there is unique and pays off the promise of that line – which I think it does.

"There were a lot of sleepless nights deciding to do the movie," he adds, "because I had to figure out what's down there. I did a lot of work on the script with my partner, [C Robert] Cargill, and the writing that we did had to do with putting more in the gorge than was in Zach's original script. I felt that what was in there was a little too familiar and didn't deliver enough on the promise of that line, but I felt that I knew how to add to that and accentuate that."

So this Valentine's Day, *The Gorge* is unlikely to be your standard romantic evening in front of the TV...

The Gorge is on Apple TV+ from 14 February.



Flirting at long distances can be troublesome.

IT'S THE PITS

Other famous valleys, gorges and canyons in sci-fi and fantasy

FORBIDDEN VALLEY
THE VALLEY OF GWANGI

Named after an Allosaurus (a Jurassic forerunner of the more famous T. rex), this bizarre depression in the Mexican desert is home to a prehistoric ecosystem ruled by dinosaurs – each one lovingly animated by stop-motion legend Ray Harryhausen.

GORGE OF ETERNAL PERIL
MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL

Medieval tourist boards must have had a nightmare trying to sell the Gorge of Eternal Peril – and the Bridge of Death that traverses it – to potential visitors. With incorrect answers to the bridge keeper's questions punishable by death, it's best to proceed with caution.

CANYON OF THE CRESCENT MOON
INDIANA JONES AND THE LAST CRUSADE

No prizes for guessing how the valley (situated in Hatay, now part of Turkey) providing a hiding place for the Holy Grail got its name. The bigger mystery is why the Temple of the Sun within looks *exactly* like Petra in Jordan.

BEGGAR'S CANYON
STAR WARS: THE PHANTOM MENACE

First namechecked by Luke Skywalker (noting its similarities to a certain Death Star trench), Tatooine's Beggar's Canyon made its screen debut in *The Phantom Menace*, where it's a memorable landmark on the course of the Boonta Eve Classic podrace.

HELM'S DEEP
THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS

This Middle-earth valley is a safe haven for the residents of Rohan whenever Saruman, Uruk-hai or any other bad guy comes calling. So iconic it got a big-screen origin story of its own, courtesy of last year's *The War Of The Rohirrim*.

NEW LINE CINEMA, LUCASFILM LIMITED, WARNER BROS

NEVER SAY NEVER

THE CREATORS OF THE POOHNIVERSE ARE BACK TO TWIST MORE CHILDHOOD TALES WITH

PETER PAN'S NEVERLAND NIGHTMARE

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

AGAIN

ONCE UPON A TIME IN 2023, independent British film studio Jagged Edge Productions unleashed *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey* on a public still mighty fond of AA Milne's good-natured, honey-loving teddy bear, thank you very much.

"It was made in seven days on £20,000 and then, honestly, things just went crazy," laughs Scott Jeffrey, co-founder of Jagged Edge with Rhys Frake-Waterfield. After going viral on social media, the copyright-dodging slasher movie, originally set for a small-scale VOD release, burst quite unexpectedly onto cinema screens around the world.

"Whereas with the sequel, *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey 2*, we had £320,000 which is still, like, crap, but it's a lot more. I'm very good at managing budgets," Jeffrey adds. "I don't waste any money; every single penny is on screen. I think that all just comes from never having had any money for films in the past!"

He has once again plundered the public domain (and the imagination of author JM Barrie) for follow-up scary-tale *Peter Pan's Neverland Nightmare*. Famously, the copyright to the original 1904 play – *Peter Pan; Or, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* – is held by Great Ormond Street Hospital.

However, in his capacity as writer and director of *Neverland Nightmare*, Jeffrey has been able to circumvent the "messy" rights situation by spinning the story around the 1911 novel *Peter And Wendy*, the copyright of which expired 50 years after Barrie's death, in 1987.

"There are a couple of territories in which we probably can't release; certain laws are a bit different," he notes.

GET IT TWISTED

Neverland Nightmare is the third chapter in Jagged Edge's Marvel-esque Twisted Childhood Universe, a developing series of interlinked films that will inject a splattering of horror into classic children's tales, including *Bambi – The Reckoning* and *Pinocchio: Unstrung*. The first "phase" (to use Marvel parlance) will climax in an *Avengers*-style mash-up, *Poohniverse: Monsters Assemble*.

Jeffrey says that *Peter Pan* was an obvious candidate for a horror reworking because "it's essentially about a guy who climbs through bedroom windows in the middle of the night, luring children out of their beds, never to be seen again. It just felt easy."

His Pan (played by Martin Portlock) has less in common with Disney's young feather-capped miscreant than Ethan Hawke's creepy serial killer, the Grabber, in *The Black Phone*. Jeffrey cites the 2021 movie, based on a short →

Captain Hook (Charity Kase, aka Harry Whitfield).

This is not how you should treat retail staff.

story by Joe Hill, as a key influence on both *Neverland Nightmare*'s visuals and storyline, which also revolves around child abductions.

"Peter believes he's sending [his victims] to 'Neverland'; he truly believes that. They become the 'lost boys.'"

In the tradition of the Grabber (and countless movie maniacs), Peter has a mask. It covers a facial disfigurement seen inflicted in a flashback to when he was working as a circus performer. "The mask is a way of luring people in," Jeffrey explains. "He'll put it on and talk in a child's voice so that people will fall into his trap and be easily led into what he's got planned for them. If he took the mask off, nobody would go near him with a bargepole!"

Befitting its bleak premise, *Neverland Nightmare* takes a more serious approach than *Blood And Honey*.

"Every film in the Twisted Childhood Universe is going to be tonally different and match whatever the director's skillset is. I like stakes and emotional characters. I like putting people in situations where, as an audience, you sit there and go, 'What would I do?' And where characters are making the situation worse by the second. There's a lot of that in this.

"In the story," he continues, "Wendy [Megan Placito] was meant to pick her little brother up from school, but she got distracted and it leads to his abduction. There's a lot of tension between her and her mum; there's a lot of blame going on. There's guilt for Wendy. There's also the fact that not only will she lose her brother, but she probably will lose her mother as well if she doesn't track him down. There's a lot at stake."

Jeffrey might say the same of his own experience. Despite working with a significantly higher budget than he's used to, he has found himself limited in some ways. "I'm still not able to provide certain things that people want," he explains. "It's the low budget-ness of making these, it's so hard. You don't have a team to lean on – it's just me and Rhys."

With his co-producer busy writing *Pinocchio: Unstrung*, Jeffrey often found himself taking on additional filming responsibilities.

"If a location falls out, I'm trying to find a new one in-between takes," he says. "There are problems going off, and you're dealing with personalities a lot of the time, which is quite difficult.

"Some people come to the shoots and they're not expecting how gritty it can be, which can cause big issues for me, with them not wanting to do certain things.

"Money really does bring more people, and people who are more experienced and that sort of stuff. And time!"

TINKER HELL

Jeffrey is preparing for mixed reactions to his take on Tinker Bell – and for good reason. He's given the sassy fairy a drug addiction. "You find out that Peter has been giving her pixie dust, which is actually heroin," he explains. "She'll do anything for him because she needs that fix all the time."

Pan's pal is played by award-winning performer and writer Kit Green. "Her talent is insane," Jeffrey beams. "It really meant a lot to her, like when I was speaking to her about what we were doing, all the mental manipulation the character undergoes. It's a really complex storyline. I'm just so excited for Tinker Bell."

So excited, in fact, that he and Green have already chatted about a potential spin-off. "But I just need to make sure... because of how this film ends... yeah," Jeffrey says, enigmatically.

He is similarly cryptic when it comes to the film's realisation of Pan's sworn enemy, Captain Hook. However, he does let slip that "Everything you're probably expecting me to do with him, I've not done. I've done something different."

Hook is played by *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* alumnus Charity Kase, known for her horror-inspired make-up, which Jeffrey had seen online. "It was nothing to do with the drag queen; I was just a fan of the Instagram. He's so talented. This came up and I thought, 'I wonder if he'd do it?' And I asked.

"Hook's design is amazing," the filmmaker enthuses. "I'm really happy with how he's turned out. He's not in this movie a huge amount, and when you get to his scenes you'll understand why. But I do intend bringing him to the forefront in *Poohniverse*."

The boy who wouldn't grow up is giving Winnie-the-Pooh a run for his honey over who can knock off his victims in the most outlandish ways. "The scalping was insane," Jeffrey, a massive horror fan himself, gushes excitedly about a grisly death-piece engineered by The Prosthetics Studio, previously responsible for the carnage in the Hundred Acre Wood.

"I literally got all giddy behind the camera. It verges a little bit *Terrifier*-esque in terms of overkill. There's a reason why Peter really goes hard on this woman," he continues. "It's not just random. He has a reason because he's fucking furious at her for something. It was so cool," he adds gleefully.

Peter and Wendy's friendship is considerably rockier than fans of the classic characters will recollect, with one particular altercation requiring stunt artists. "It was just chaos," Jeffrey

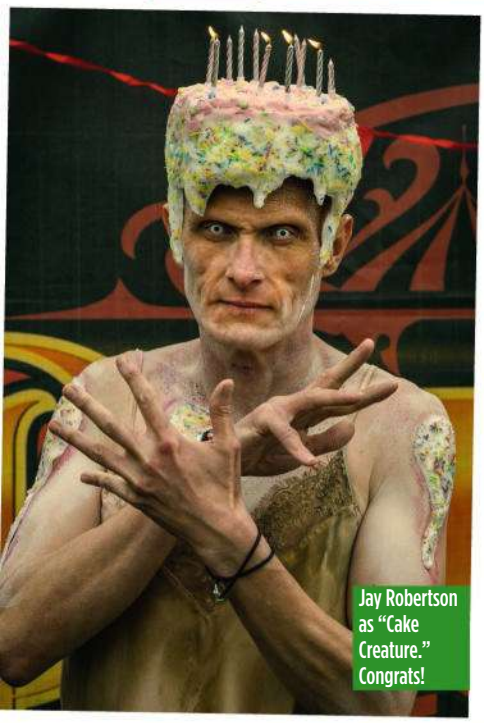
FAN SERVICE

Why the duo still keep the kills coming

"We had to really grow a thick skin, especially on *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey*," says Jeffrey of the lambasting the producers received from angry Disney fans on social media following Jagged Edge's maiden voyage into their Twisted Childhood Universe. "People were saying we were lazy on all this. People might not like it, but no one was lazy making it. It was hell to make that film. We had so many problems. Rhys threw up on the set, it was so stressful.

"No film is easy to make. Some people are going into these *Winnie-The-Pooh* films and they're wanting to hate them before they've even seen them. It's like, 'Well you're going to hate it, aren't you? You're not going to have a good time if you go into them so negative, so just stop.' Anyway, whatever. They'll do what they do. But we've got an audience, and hopefully they'll keep coming back."

Peter and Tinker Bell share a moment.



Jay Robertson as "Cake Creature." Congrats!

Martin Portlock gets dolled up as Peter Pan.

Wendy (Megan Placito) goes on the hunt.

Kit Green as Tinker Bell, a fairy with a habit.

recalls. "I'd be sat behind the monitor, which is exciting as a director but nerve-racking as a producer because it's my company and if anyone gets hurt it's all on me. I'm watching these people doing really dangerous stuff, like, 'Oh my god!'

"I wanted it to feel like a true 19-year-old girl going up against this lunatic, who is adrenaline-driven," he continues.

"A normal 19-year-old girl doesn't know how to fight, doesn't know how to defend herself. So I wanted it to feel really real. I wanted her to get beaten the hell out of, I wanted her to really fight. What she goes through in this film is insane."

As for Pan, Jeffrey says that a moment towards the end will reveal something about him that shaped who he is now. "But ultimately, his actions are despicable, and you really will despise him."

Building on the idea that the Twisted Childhood movies take place in a shared universe, *Neverland Nightmare* includes ties to *Blood And Honey*, while also planting seeds for future films.

For instance, Peter DeSouza-Feighoney, who plays Wendy's brother Michael, will appear in *Pinocchio: Unstrung* as a fellow pupil at the boy puppet's school. Wendy's mother, Mary Darling (Teresa Banham), meanwhile, is already familiar from her role as a therapist in *Winnie-The-Pooh: Blood And Honey 2*. "When you see her in *Peter Pan*, you'll see she's wearing the exact same outfit she wore in *Winnie 2*," Jeffrey notes, pointing out that the films are set at the same time.

> **"Every film in the Twisted Childhood Universe is going to be tonally different"**

"Everything is being thought out," he continues. "I'm creating this town and this world where all these creatures and villains are slowly invading it, then we get to *Poohniverse*."

Benefiting from a budget Winnie-the-Pooh and Peter Pan can only wish upon a star for, *Poohniverse: Monsters Assemble* – which Jeffrey describes as "like *The Avengers*, but a horror version" – commences a two-month shoot in April.

He promises an "intense and wild" ride which will unite various survivors. "All the villains are coming back – the ones that survived," he adds. "It's going to be carnage."

But that's another story. In the meantime, he hopes Peter Pan lives happily ever after. "It's a fun story with lots of twists and turns. It's very different to *Winnie-The-Pooh*..."

Peter Pan's Neverland Nightmare is released on 24 February.

PHOTOS: DAVID INGE/ JAGGED EDGE PRODUCTIONS. STOCK IMAGES: GLEB GURALNYK/GETTY

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JONATHAN LISCO SAYS THE PAST AND PRESENT SURVIVORS ARE GOING WILD IN YELLOWJACKETS SEASON THREE

WORDS:
TARA BENNETT

FERAL

Femmes

Tawny Cypress as Taissa and Lauren Ambrose as Van (present day).

IN JUST TWO SEASONS OF SHOWTIME'S HIT HORROR series *Yellowjackets*, there's been a catastrophic plane crash, a wild wolf attack, several affairs, a *lot* of murders and two cannibalistic feasts. Not bad for a show about a team of all-star, female, New Jersey high school soccer players.

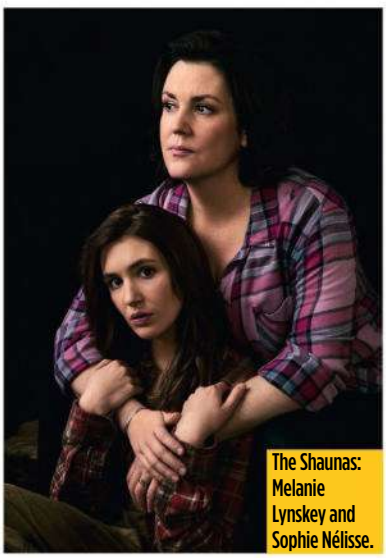
But it's clear by now that the subtext driving the narrative is *really* about what happens when, post-plane crash, these teen survivors let their IDs go wild, then get saved and have to function once again in proper society. The show services dual storylines, one set circa 1996 with the teens in the remote wilderness of Canada where they're stuck, and the other is 25 years later, back in suburban New Jersey, where the adult survivors are not doing that great... Season two ended with a local wilderness reunion with adult mum Shauna (Melanie Lynskey), NJ Senate candidate Taissa Turner (Tawny Cypress), eccentric Misty Quigley (Christina Ricci), and new age guru Lottie (Simone Kessell) messing up their lives so badly with secrets, lies and murders that it all comes to a head, leading to the tragic accidental death of their long-haunted friend, Natalie Scatorccio (Juliette Lewis).

Many fans were up in arms at the loss of Lewis from the cast, but *Yellowjackets* executive producer/co-showrunner Jonathan Lisco tells *SFX* that while he respects the passion, death has always been part of their storytelling.

Lottie past and present: Simone Kessell and Courtney Eaton.

Van now and then: Lauren Ambrose and Liv Hewson.

Sophie Thatcher returns as Teen Natalie.


The Shaunas: Melanie Lynskey and Sophie Nélisse.

> **“If the show is about trauma, then there needs to be consequences”**

“If the show is about trauma and the consequences of what they went through, then there needs to be consequences,” Lisco says, without regret. “There can’t be consequences if you’re not going to have what they went through affect some of our seminal characters.

“For better or worse, we hope that that’s understandable to our very dear audience, because if the impact doesn’t have an effect on them emotionally or psychologically, then what are we doing? Because that’s the conceit of the show.”

In the present storyline, Lisco says season three returns about six weeks after Nat’s death, and deals with that and the ongoing spiral of nihilistic decisions all of the adult women have been making since they reunited and finally started picking at their past trauma together. More so than other seasons, Lisco says they’re not afraid to show these women behaving badly and not judge them for it. “We watch [Shauna] unravelling, and we feel a kind of empathy for that because we understand that,” Lisco says of this wife and mother, clearly unhappy with her life. “But another thing that we’re playing with is, because you sympathise or empathise with some of Shauna’s journey, you start to feel like she’s ultimately the hero.

“I don’t want to call her the anti-hero, because I keep leaning in and saying, ‘Shauna, you can do better. Appeal to your angels, not your demons.’ That’s a narrative drive that we love and we want the audience to continue to feel. Would it be so wrong to tell a story about characters who don’t necessarily deserve our love?”

Lisco says they want to see audiences challenged by that notion. “How does that flip the audience into new expectations for that character? Do we lose the audience then? I personally don’t think so,” he says with confidence. “I think it would be a really interesting thing to start looking at characters whom we *shouldn’t* be loving.”

Another thing that is going to feel different this season is the structure of the show. Since they’ve been culling some of their large ensemble of characters, their signature way of connecting past and present stories thematically through the storylines of their teen and adult characters doesn’t work as much any more.

“We’ve made it more difficult for ourselves, but that’s kind of the point,” Lisco says of rethinking how they transition between past and present. “We had to dig deep to come up with creative solutions to these problems so we can keep each season in line with the DNA that everybody loves about the show, but have it feel completely different too.”

They worked out the major themes of the third season around those structural changes too. Looking back at what they’ve tackled so far, Lisco says that season one was really about, “These characters in the wilderness adapting to their new surroundings, trying to survive. In the present-day storyline, our adult characters were trying to convince themselves that their trauma was buried and that it wasn’t going to affect them.

“In season two, there’s a new religious structure and a new social structure without all the conventions that they’re used to,” he continues. “In the wilderness storyline, they have to figure out what their new society is. Meanwhile, in the present-day storyline, our adult characters no longer have the ability to suppress what happened to them, and there’s a reckoning that’s happened.”

WILD THINGS

And what of season three? Lisco says it’s about the characters embracing their “ecstatic, feral selves” with abandon.

“As a society, we’ve decided that there are mutual, collective gains in giving up our most feral selves,” he explains. “But this feral self has been biologically hardwired in us for quite a long time. Getting over that is a point of logic: like, ‘Let’s do that so that we can live in a civil society.’ But now these women are asking themselves, ‘If everything is falling apart →

Misty (Christina Ricci): she *did* start the fire.

PICTURES: KAILEY SCHWERMAN, COLIN BENTLEY, VICTORIA WILL/PARAMOUNT+ WITH SHOWTIME

ODD MAN OUT

Kevin Alves plays teenage Travis Martinez, who is spiralling this season after what they did to his brother, Javi

As we start season three in the woods, where does Travis fit in among these young women?
Navigating Travis as a whole is so interesting because he is the only male figure now. But he's in what we would call a society where he doesn't have any control or any say. We see that in season two. I don't believe that Travis eats Javi because he thinks it's the right thing to do. He does it because it's the *only* option. We see that throughout season three, as well. As a character, Travis is fighting his morals versus this society that we've created and how we make decisions.

Does he try to have agency, or is he entirely at their mercy?
My favourite part about our timeline this season is this battle between what's right, and what feels good. There's something really interesting about that with the entire group, and Travis is definitely right in the middle of that. He's probably, in many ways, one of the most conflicted because he doesn't have people that he can lean on.

No one's really wanting him there. If they do want him there, it's to use him to some extent, for something that's more appealing to them. He's right in the middle of these decisions that are being made, yet you'll barely ever see him get to have a real say, which is super scary.

Who influences his arc the most this season?
There is this very weird connection that Travis relies on with Lottie that doesn't go away. It's almost like he has this false sense of trust in Lottie, because she's the only person who's given him any attention. Except for Natalie, it's the only real attention he gets. We're going to see that manifest itself in really mysterious and hard to understand ways.

Will he try to reach out to anyone else?
We are going to see in many places where Travis fits into the group. We'll start to get a better grasp of him in that sense, but in very nuanced places.

LORENZO AGIUS/SHOWTIME

Back in 1996, things aren't going too well. Again.

Jasmin Savoy Brown (left) plays Teen Taissa.

anyway, and we created this religion that was keeping us together in the past and so much of our domestic lives now in adult life are falling away, what if we lean back to our feral selves?' In a way, that would be the most radical thing that grown-ups could do."

Lisco says that led the writers this season to pick up the wilderness story six weeks after Javi's death, where these young women have survived winter, the cabin burning and starvation and come through to the other side.

"The times when they were living on the edge, the times when they weren't so secure, they look back on those times as the most vivid and memorable times," he says of the present-day survivors. "It tapped into an ID that felt pure, before houses and partners and responsibilities.

"So the truth of the matter is that these women got addicted to that in the wilderness. Then they find themselves in middle age, and they're living a pale life by comparison." Trying to get back to that state of mind is going to dredge up even more for them to wrestle with this season.

"I'll just say that because they had to recognise patterns when they were in the wilderness to keep them alive, like how the wind blew a certain way, or the wilderness wanted something, all that becomes very coded," Lisco explains.

"Now, 25 years later, they can't help but engage in a kind of false pattern recognition in their adult lives. So they see something happening, or they want something to happen, and they might start saying, 'It's just like what happened in the wilderness. We now need to do *this*.'

"Your adult brain kicks in with the frontal cortex and says, 'That's ridiculous!' But you know what? That's meaningless in light of the emotional reaction that you have; that you know truth when you see it. So 'False pattern recognition or real pattern recognition?' might be a good question to ask as we go into season three."

Will that connect to the signs and symbols they found in the wilderness that have come back to haunt them in the present? Lisco says that all of it will continue to be interpreted both on an objective level, and more importantly, on a subjective level.

> **"The truth of the matter is that these women got addicted to that in the wilderness"**

"Whether or not there's an *actual* monster out there to get them is a question that each of them has to answer for themselves," he says. "If they answer it differently, and there's cognitive dissonance in the way in which they answer it, then there could be a true monster in the woods.

"But I'm really interested in playing with concepts like that, and, personally, less interested in having there be some kind of malignant external force."

Lisco and the team hope audiences embrace these changes, because they've got a lot more story to tell. "I think it's safe to say we would be a little heartbroken if we couldn't continue to go on and tell season four," he says. "Once you see the end of season three, you'll know exactly why."

Yellowjackets is on Paramount+ from 14 February.

STOCK IMAGES: BENEDEK, MARGARITA TKACHENKO, HIHOBR/GETTY

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

NNEDI OKORAFOR

Close to home: the American writer discusses her most personal novel

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Zbigniew Bzdak

THE WORD META, MEANING SELF-referential, has become overused in popular discourse of late. So much so that *SFX* apologises when using the term to describe Nnedi Okorafor's remarkable new novel, *Death Of The Author*. Not to worry. "It does apply," she says. "When I describe the book, I say that it's *self-aware*."

In part here, she's referring to the book's structure, which is split between two narratives. One, set in something like our own present day, stars Zelu, a paraplegic Nigerian-American who (in Okorafor's blunt description) we meet when she's busy becoming "a failed novelist and, basically, a failed professor". With her life falling apart, Zelu writes a science fiction novel set in a post-human future, *Rusted Robots*. The book becomes "its own phenomena", a bestseller that transforms Zelu's fortunes.

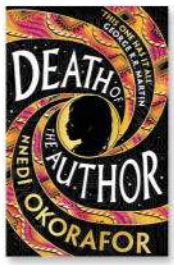
"It's very close to me," says Okorafor of this narrative, which returns often to the theme of relationships with our nearest and dearest. "I come from a fairly sizeable Nigerian-American family that's very intrusive and has a lot of opinions, and decides where you're supposed to go. It doesn't matter if you're 35. I really wanted to write about that."

So why hasn't she tackled this subject before? After all, Okorafor is 50, an experienced novelist. A huge factor here is that, "I just wasn't ready, I wasn't ready to do that so nakedly." Then came a tragedy that spurred Okorafor on. "What made me ready to write it was not something that was good," she says. "It was the passing of my sister. I started writing this literally two days after she passed." She hesitates, searching for the right words, before suddenly expressing herself directly. "A lot of things that I write are when I'm in pain."

SPINAL TRAP

There's a pattern here that dates back to Okorafor's earliest days as a writer, a career that began when she had an operation to correct scoliosis (curvature of the spine). The surgery should have been routine, but instead Okorafor, a tennis player who performed at "a super-high athletic level", found herself suffering paralysis.

"It was in the first few days where I was losing my mind and I had to do something, that was when I wrote my first story," she remembers. In huge pain, she wrote the story on "the edges of the pages" of a copy of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* – a copy with an illustration that has inspired her new novel, she adds. This first story was "about a woman who could fly" because "when you can fly, you don't have to walk – so you can see where that comes from".



BIODATA

From
Cincinnati, Ohio

Greatest Hits
Okorafor has won Hugo, Nebula and World Fantasy Awards. Her novels include *Zahrah The Windseeker* (2005), *Who Fears Death* (2010), *Akata Witch* (2011) and *Noor* (2021). She has also written comics, including *Black Panther: Long Live The King* (2017) for Marvel.

Random Fact
Okorafor's award-winning Binti trilogy looks set to be brought to the screen by Hulu. Okorafor will pen the script with screenwriter Stacy Osei-Kuffour (*Watchmen*).

She did recover the ability to walk, but the days when sport was at the centre of her life were over. It was a long process, echoed in passages in *Death Of The Author* where Zelu learns to walk using an experimental exoskeleton. "It felt like my body was being pulled apart," Okorafor recalls of her own experience of being raised up so that she could learn again what it was like to be standing.

There's a sense, suggests *SFX*, that even now Okorafor approaches writing like an athlete. "Being an athlete does not stop when you stop competing," she agrees. "It's part of you, and so the way that I write is very driven by the athletic aspect of me: the discipline, the pushing forward and, when something's difficult, not avoiding it, facing it, and moving through it." She has, she adds with that characteristic directness, "no fear of failure" and is "extremely ambitious".

PAST MASTERS

Once she began to write, Okorafor knew this was what she wanted to do. After "a year of hell" and now "using a cane", she returned to college and ditched plans to be an entomologist. Her parents didn't approve. "[They] were like, 'You need to find a real career.'"

She took a masters in journalism. "I have two masters and a PhD," she says, laughing. "In my family, that is not a bragging right, that's something you're *supposed to do*." Acknowledgment from her family that she might actually be a professional storyteller only came when 2005's *Zahrah The Windseeker* won the prestigious Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa.

As for why she has so often written science fiction, it seems to be at some deep level because it represents overcoming difficulties. In the new book, tellingly, writing *Rusted Robots* changes Zelu's life forever. This presented a daunting challenge to Okorafor when she came to recreate passages from *Rusted Robots*, which had to be convincing.

Then there was the seemingly "impossible" challenge of writing a world without humans. She hesitated but says, "One of the rules that I know about myself as a writer is that when I'm avoiding something, I know I have to do it."

She needn't have worried. The robots, she realised, represented "the evolution of humanity". It was "exhilarating" to write about them. To look at that another way, Okorafor's robots are post-human people, something the end of the book subtly makes clear. Not for the first time, Okorafor seems to have found that science fiction represents freedom.

Death Of The Author is published by Gollancz on 20 February.

ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/TNS/ALAMY LIVE NEWS

> I have two masters and a PhD. In my family, that is not a bragging right

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FEBRUARY 2025

Reviews

edited by Ian Berriman

CINEMA 74 | TV 76 | HOME ENTERTAINMENT 80 | BOOKS 86 | COMICS 92 | GAMES & STUFF 94

THIS ISSUE
52
REVIEWS

74

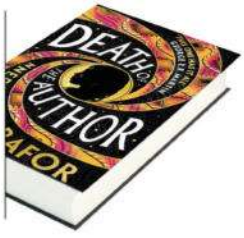
WOLF MAN

Time To Get Ill

Highlights

76
DUNE: PROPHECY
→ This prequel series focuses on the early days of the Bene Gesserit order.

80
SECTION 31
→ Michelle Yeoh's Philippa Georgiou returns in a TV movie about the Federation's black ops division.



86
DEATH OF THE AUTHOR
→ Hugo winner Nnedi Okorafor's new novel is her most autobiographical yet.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

WOLF MAN

Sick as a dog

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 103 minutes

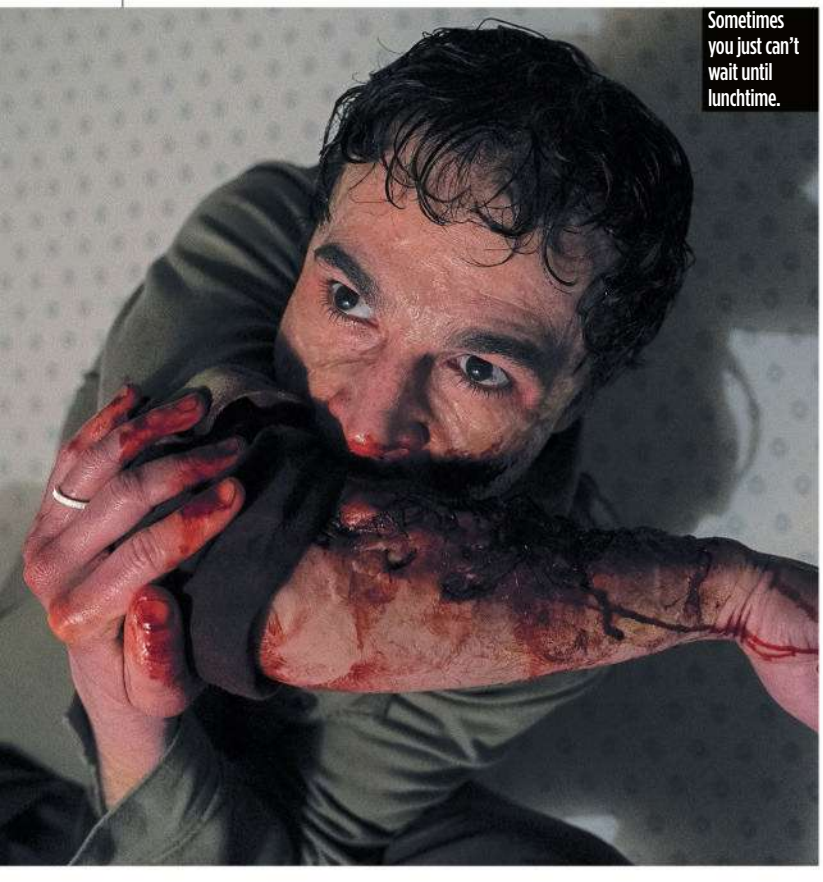
Director **Leigh Whannell**

Cast **Christopher Abbott, Julia Garner, Matilda Firth, Sam Jaeger**

First mooted as a Dark Universe project in 2014, and then abandoned after the commercial and critical failure of Tom Cruise's *The Mummy*, this reimagining of Universal's 1941 classic *The Wolf Man* has melted through various iterations. A final shapeshift saw director Leigh Whannell (*Insidious: Chapter 3*, *Upgrade*) grab hold of the leash – an exciting prospect given that he so skilfully updated James Whale's *The Invisible Man* into a terrifying tale of gaslighting and physical abuse.

Wolf Man is also smart but not *as* smart, rather skating over its themes of passed-down toxicity and fracturing family. Its big idea is to focus on the tragedy of the situation, treating our hero's transformation as a terrible disease not unlike that suffered by Seth Brundle in David Cronenberg's *The Fly*. Teeth, hair and fingernails fall out, skin blisters, and Arjen Tuiten's make-up and prosthetic designs alter face and torso by degrees.

The changes mostly register scene by scene, with only two or three brief shots delivering live transformations akin to the showstopping work of Rick Baker and Rob Bottin in, respectively, *An American Werewolf In London* and *The Howling*.



Sometimes you just can't wait until lunchtime.

Like Tuiten's effects work, the story is contained, with Blake (Christopher Abbott) persuading his wife Charlotte (Julia Garner) and daughter Ginger (Matilda Firth) to accompany him from their San Francisco home to the isolated Oregon farmhouse of his late father. Upon their moonlit arrival, they're attacked by a bipedal beast. Blake is clawed, and the rest of the action unfolds over one long night as the family are besieged.

Shot moodily and murkily by Whannell's regular DoP Stefan Duscio, *Wolf Man* builds economically from one set-piece to the next. It's not above delivering a couple of well-crafted jump scares, and the body horror is suitably icky even as it brings the pathos.

But Whannell is most interested in psychological frights. A neat trick, repeated several times, is to have the camera pivot 180 degrees to switch from the viewpoint of Charlotte or Ginger as they soothe the mutating Blake, to that which

> **"Whannell is most interested in psychological frights"**

he now sees and hears: phosphorous faces as if moulded from pure moonlight, with broken, incomprehensible sounds in place of words. Such dissociative dissonance is scarily effective, though the drama never quite attains the level of emotional devastation it's reaching for.

Whereas the 1941 film can be read as a metaphor for Nazism (ordinary people turned into killers), Whannell's offering of isolation and illness is designed to tap into Covid. It might have been more effective had it arrived two years ago, but there's still plenty here to enjoy. Particularly potent is its placing of lycanthropes within the recognisable natural world – watch how Blake gnaws and scratches at the suppurating wound on his arm. **Jamie Graham**

i Whannell had a weekly "Full Moon Film Club" during pre-production. Films shown included Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012).

COMPANION

★★★★☆

RELEASED 31 JANUARY

15 | 97 minutes

Director **Drew Hancock**

Cast **Sophie Thatcher, Jack Quaid, Harvey Guillén, Rupert Friend**

The trailer for *Companion* teases a twisted romance from the producers of *Barbarian* and *The Notebook*; a sleight of hand description that teases only elements of Drew Hancock's directorial debut. Indeed, *Companion* encompasses almost a half dozen genres and naming them all would give away the film's surprises.

We can, at least, set up the premise. Three couples, including Jack Quaid and Sophie Thatcher's seemingly devoted duo, head to a holiday home in the woods. This is not your average *Evil Dead*-style cabin, but a luxury mansion owned by Rupert Friend's creepy drug dealer. A murder mystery (of sorts) ensues.

To say any more would spoil the fun. The first major turn – the one best preserved for the cinema – comes at the 20-minute mark. Once it's unveiled, *Companion* rapidly unfolds, playing with our expectations, leading to some genuinely shocking moments.

This may be psychological horror, yet it is wildly funny, with several laugh-out-loud moments delivered by a sterling cast. Harvey Guillen and Lucas Cage are particularly effective as a comic relief couple, while Thatcher gets a few Ripley-esque action moments, and Quaid's baby face makes for effective deception.

Companion ends up a tight, thrilling watch – just don't read too much more about it before going in. **Jack Shepherd**

KRAVEN THE HUNTER

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 127 minutes
Director **JC Chandor**
Cast **Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Russell Crowe, Ariana DeBose, Fred Hechinger**

Sounding the death knell – at least for now; you know the studio won't want to stop trying, despite all the reasons not to – of Sony's universe of Spider-Man spin-off characters comes *Kraven The Hunter*. It lands with not so much the satisfying thwack of an arrow hitting a target, but more the wet splat of a bag of dog poo thrown at a door.

Let's start with the positives, shall we? There are a couple of well-realised set-pieces. And as Kraven, the villainous big game hunter/Spidey arch-enemy (here spun as a crime boss-stalking anti-hero), given powers by a magic potion, Aaron Taylor-Johnson gives it his all, scrabbling around in an odd combo of parkour crossed with someone encouraged to embody an animal.

But around him is a film so ludicrous you wonder how someone like JC Chandor, who has brought us the accomplished likes of *All Is Lost*, *Triple Frontier* and *A Most Violent Year*, ended up tangled in such soulless corporate factory product. There are ludicrous accents (Russell Crowe, obvs), cardboard acting (some of it in the main flashback is likely to make you squirm), and overall a sense of leaden, uninspired storytelling. If this is the pinnacle of Sony's efforts, best let them quietly expire. **James White**

PRESENCE

Ghost Watch

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 85 minutes
Director **Steven Soderbergh**
Cast **Lucy Liu, Chris Sullivan, Callina Liang, Eddy Maday**

If you've ever used the virtual tour function on an online property site, *Presence* might give you a slight feeling of déjà vu.

While Steven Soderbergh is no stranger to genre films, he's never made an out-and-out horror before. *Presence* suggests we've all been missing out. It's built on a brilliantly simple conceit: what if a haunted house movie was shot from the perspective of the restless spirit dwelling there?

In practice, this means the viewer is locked into a roving camera in long takes, as it glides up and down the stairs, silently observing the interactions of a family who've moved into a new home – a fairly ordinary, upscale middle-class house, not some cobwebbed gothic mansion. The daughter of the clan, the sensitive Chloe (Callina Liang), gradually begins to detect its presence. She's also mourning the death of her best friend. Could these two facts be related?

> **"The viewer is locked into a roving camera in long takes"**

It's a highly effective device – maybe the neatest such innovation since *Paranormal Activity 3*'s fan-cam – which may initially make you slightly queasy, and latterly makes you feel entrapped.

Screenwriter David Koepp employs some effective misdirection, setting up one character as especially unlikeable, and leaving you puzzling over what (if anything) the mother's ill-defined financial misdeeds might have to do with it all.

Simultaneously, he skewers "nice guy" misogynists, and puts a fresh spin on the nature of ghosts – one that you're unlikely to see coming. Soderbergh recently declared himself an ardent admirer of indie horror. Let's hope *Presence* isn't his last contribution to that space. **Ian Berriman**

i In 2007, Soderbergh dreamed about going to Ingmar Bergman's house for a party. On waking, he found out Bergman had died.

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
PG | 110 minutes
Director **Jeff Fowler**
Cast **Jim Carrey, Ben Schwartz, Idris Elba, Keanu Reeves**

"Double your villain, double your fun!" chortles Jim Carrey in *Sonic 3*, a third outing for Sega's beloved blue blur that finds the *Ace Ventura* star playing not just mad scientist Ivo Robotnik but also his 110-year-old grandfather Gerald. The fun quotient, though, remains pretty consistent with Sonic's earlier vehicles, for all the latex-assisted lunacy Carrey lends to his latest incarnation, or Idris Elba's hilariously stern turn as "fist for brains" Knuckles.

Once our hero's nemesis, the pugnacious echidna has now joined "Team Sonic", alongside flying fox Tails. The power of three, though, is still no match for Shadow (Keanu Reeves), a prickly teleporter out for payback after 50 years of enforced hibernation.

The race to stop him getting his gloved hands on a world-endangering weapon leads Sonic (Ben Schwartz) and his chums to London for what initially plays like a tongue-in-cheek reprise of the most recent *Mission: Impossible*. Alas, director Jeff Fowler tends to overcomplicate things, not least with flashbacks.

Carrey's Eggman twofer is good for guffaws, incorporating a dance-off to The Chemical Brothers' "Galvanize". But Reeves rarely extends beyond a surly snarl in a film that often mistakes hyperactivity for real entertainment. **Neil Smith**

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- One of the Sisterhood uses The Voice.
- One of the Sisterhood does their truthsayer shtick.
- Two of the Sisterhood communicate by sign language.

- There's an extreme close-up of an eye.
- There's a heartbeat on the soundtrack.
- There's ancestral whispering on the soundtrack.
- Someone uses a burning metaphor.

DUNE: PROPHECY

A Song Of Spice And Fire

★★★½☆

UK **Sky Atlantic/NOW, streaming now**
US **HBO Max, streaming now**
Showrunner **Alison Schapker**
Cast **Emily Watson, Olivia Williams, Travis Fimmel, Sarah-Sofie Boussnina, Chris Mason, Mark Strong**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **So there are** prophecies, various Houses, something big and awful coming, giant monsters, scheming factions and random nude sex scenes. It must be a new *Game Of Thrones* spin-off, yeah? Oh, hang on – there are spaceships too...

Welcome to *Dune: Prophecy*, a prequel series set some 10,000 years before the events of *Dune*. Not that you'd realise – it looks more like it's set 10 weeks before *Dune* in terms of tech, social structure and design ethos, but that's surely a deliberate nod to the books.

To be fair, *Dune* existed long before *A Song Of Ice And Fire*, and many of the elements in *Dune: Prophecy* that appear to echo George RR Martin's world-building were established by Frank Herbert decades ago. While those original *Dune* novels are considered classics of science fiction, they also had a profound effect on the epic fantasy genre.

But whereas previous screen adaptations of *Dune* have felt solidly sci-fi, *Dune: Prophecy* leans heavily into the epic fantasy vibe. Maybe this is a reaction to having to compete with the Denis Villeneuve films, with the series attempting to find its own identity. More likely, though, it's the source material. The series is loosely based on the Great Schools Of Dune novel trilogy (2012–2016) by Brian Herbert and Kevin J Anderson, and they were already feeding off the fantasy genre that Brian's father had helped to inspire. The result is a series that reeks of quality on so many levels, but somehow never quite kicks into gear.

> **"A constant state of portentous high tension"**

The story delves into the origins of many of the staples of the *Dune* universe, centring on the Sisterhood that will evolve into the gene-wrangling Bene Gesserit. At this point they're led by a couple of devious Harkonnen siblings, who are using the Sisterhood's truthsayer skills to mould the Imperium to their liking.

But a prophecy warns that bad times are a-coming, and a mysterious, super-powered soldier who survived being swallowed by a sandworm starts influencing the Emperor to fight back against the Sisterhood.

There's scheming, double-crossing, backstabbing and politicking galore as Atreides and Harkonnen ancestors, along with the Sisters, jostle for power in the court of Emperor Corrino. It looks stunning, the acting is impeccable and there are some memorable "Red Wedding"-style set-pieces. But it also all feels a little familiar, and while there are shocks and twists there's nothing drop-dead jawdropping.

It's also a tad single-note – a constant state of portentous high tension – with none of the wit, earthiness and charm that livened up those early series of *Game Of Thrones*. And there's plenty of "characters telling each other stuff they already know just so the audience knows too" exposition.

The result is a solid, well-made telefantasy series for fans of solid, well-made telefantasy series, but one that lacks spice. **Dave Golder**

i Shirley Henderson (Moaning Myrtle in *Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire*) was originally cast as the Empress Natalya.

DOCTOR WHO: "JOY TO THE WORLD"

Heartbreak Hotel

★★★★☆

UK **BBC iPlayer, streaming now**
Rest of world **Disney+, streaming now**
Director **Alex Sanjiv Pillai**
Cast **Ncuti Gatwa, Nicola Coughlan, Steph de Whalley, Joel Fry**

CHRISTMAS SPECIAL **Sorely missed** during the Jodie Whittaker era, the restoration of the *Doctor Who* special to its rightful place on Christmas Day is something to be truly grateful for.

"Joy To The World" is in many ways a typically lightweight Christmas tale (don't think *too* hard about the mechanics of the hotel setting or its guests), but one with some darker tones. The Doctor wanders into the Time Hotel, where every room is linked to a famous time and place. Want to catch a presidential assassination or the signing of Magna Carta? This is your dream destination. While there, the Doctor spots a suspicious figure handcuffed to a briefcase, and in investigating him stumbles across a rundown hotel room in 2024 London, occupied by the ironically named Joy, a young woman putting a brave face on a difficult time. Things quickly get more dangerous for both of them from there on...

The "joyful" heart of the story is really the year the Doctor spends in London, waiting for his chance to return to the Time Hotel. Moffat never misses a chance for a "X who waited" story, and this is perhaps his best, as slow friendship blooms between the Doctor and receptionist Anita.

Somewhat less joyful (rather, blisteringly angry) is the story's gut punch about Partygate, and Joy's devastation at missing her mother's death while politicians drank wine. It's a righteous rant, but a potentially painful watch for those who lived such an experience and may not have been prepared to confront those feelings on Christmas Day. And the oh-so-neat ending may grate with some.

But the fact that *Doctor Who* is with us at Christmas, defending the universe and decrying those who abuse us, is joyful indeed.

Rhian Drinkwater

A bad time for housekeeping to suddenly barge in.

i Jesus is commonly believed to have been born between 6BC and 4BC, not, as the end of this episode suggests, 1AD.

WHAT IF...? Season Three

Timelines They Are A-Changin'

★★½☆☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**
Head writer **Matthew Chauncey**
Cast **Jeffrey Wright, Jason Isaacs, Hayley Atwell, Sebastian Stan**

EPISODES 3.01-3.08 **Ever since the** big-screen MCU entered a mutliverse of madness, Marvel's *What If...?* has become increasingly redundant. The the first season was full of tight, self-contained, sometimes thought-provoking tales based on easy-to-grasp divergences from the prime timeline.

But this final season instead feels like a series of montage sequences from *Deadpool & Wolverine* or *Across The Spiderverse*, based on weirdly esoteric "alternate" scenarios featuring B-, C- and Z-list MCU characters. It's everything, everywhere all mashed up.

So we get manga-style mecha Avengers; a Bollywood dance-off between Agatha and Kingo from the Eternals; and Howard the Duck mating with Darcy Lewis (surely a sly middle-finger to all those criticisms about the implied bestiality in the 1986 *Howard* movie?) to produce a universally important egg.

There's a Winter Soldier/Red Guardian buddy caper; Shang-Chi and female Hawkeye Kate Bishop as gunslingers in the Wild West; and more unwanted love for Eternals in a story where the Emergence took place and Ironheart is our only hope.

It all ends with a big two-parter centring on the Watcher being held to account for interfering and not just watching, which descends into an overlong battle featuring Peggy Carter's all-female, multiverse hopping bit-parters.

There are some fun ideas, some amazing visuals, loads of fan-pleasing Easter eggs, and occasional moments when the characters click and make you care (the Red Guardian/Winter Soldier interaction is surprisingly effective). But too often the stories are disjointed, patchwork see-what-sticks brainstorms. The MCU big guns are suspiciously absent, and there's a questionable reliance on the series' own internal mythology. Clearly the showrunners were aiming for an arc, but did *What If...?* really need one?

If season two felt like mission creep, season three is mission headlong hurtle through a minefield. **Dave Golder**

"Don't worry dear, I've been tested for fowl pest."

i The Howard ep mentions "couples cliff-diving on Vormir", a sport presumably inspired by Hawkeye and Black Widow.

STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS Season Five

Adios Cerritos

★★★★½

UK/US **Paramount +, streaming now**

Showrunner **Mike McMahan**

Cast **Tawny Newsome, Jack Quaid, Noël Wells, Gabrielle Ruiz**

"Put that away now or lose a hand. Your choice."

EPISODES 5.01-5.10 **These are the** final voyages of the USS Cerritos – on screen, at least. And *Star Trek*'s first comedy cartoon show goes out on a high.

You'd have thought they'd have run out of the best *Trek* gags by now, but somehow the hilarious, fan-pleasing references keep coming, and so do the zany, high-concept plot ideas worthy of the show's more serious, live-action cousins. There's an arc plot about parallel universes that culminates in an episode that looks like it should be the last word in multiverses, until someone gives a beautiful speech about the existential value of multiverses. There's another arc plot about Boimler growing facial hair which culminates in a beard.

There's a feel-good episode about Klingon farming, a visit to the worst space station in Starfleet, and an episode about what the officers get up to when the Lower Deckies aren't around. There are guest vocal appearances from Brent Spiner (Data), Jolene Blalock (T'Pol), Andrew Robinson (Garak), Alexander Siddig (Bashir), Garrett Wang (as a legion of Kims) and even Alfre Woodard (*First Contact*'s Lily Sloane).

"The hilarious references keep coming"

The season also has a brilliant finale, whose only failing is that it's not quite as good as the penultimate episode – honestly, the dimension-hopping "Fissure Quest" is one of *Trek*'s all-time greats. Plus there's the best "Noooooooooooo!" gag since *Revenge Of The Sith* (it *was* a gag in *Revenge Of The Sith*, right?) – and, for *Carry On* connoisseurs, the phrases "Algorithmic tossing" and "She can afford to be with her giant melons".

So long, *Lower Decks*, and thanks for all the fissures.

Dave Golder

ℹ Appropriately enough, the quartermaster's store in "Starbase 80?!" has far more red shirts in stock than any other colour...

TOMORROW AND I

Not the old-school Thai

★★★½☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Director **Paween Purijitpanya**

Cast **Pakorn Chatborirak, Violette Wautier, Ray Macdonald, Tangkwa-Chananticha Chaipa**

"Weird... I don't remember that being there."

EPISODES 1.01-1.04 **Looking for a** fresh perspective on sci-fi's current buzz topics? Then *Tomorrow And I* is well worth checking out. This four-part anthology series from Thailand (with each episode well over an hour long) has been tagged an Asian *Black Mirror* by people who've only read a synopsis.

Sure, there are parallels to Charlie Brooker's series, but there's one major difference: the show explores how technology specifically impacts the conservative values of Thai society. And *Tomorrow And I* is *very* Thai, which is somewhat surprising for a Netflix original. Sure, the streamer has done much to promote Asian TV production across the globe, but often these shows have a degree of homogenisation to make them palatable to worldwide audiences.

Tomorrow And I is uncompromisingly Thai, both in its subject matter and the visual language. For some in the West this will be a barrier, while for others it will be exactly what makes the series interesting.

Having said all that, the series opens with its most straightforward and dullest instalment, a slow-moving, overly earnest tale about the ethics of cloning, with a gender-identification twist. It should be thought-provoking, but ends up downright corny. Instead, skip straight to "Paradistopia", a wonderfully pervy episode about sexbots and AI prostitution, shot with a cod–'60s aesthetic, that gloriously sends up Thailand's conservative attitudes to sex. Like all the episodes here, it's more interested in asking questions than providing pat answers.

Religion is gamified in "Buddha Data" when a monk rails against a new AI merit system that belittles centuries of Buddhist teachings. But if you only see one episode, make it "Octopus Girl". A bizarre, way-out, visually striking comedy, it deals with global warming and vaccination in a world where the rain won't stop. It also features a piranha cat, an *X-Factor*-style singing contest and an ending so bleak you may have nightmares.

Dave Golder

ℹ The *Ski Sunday* theme tune ("Pop Looks Bach") makes an unexpected appearance on the soundtrack for the sexbot episode.

GOOSEBUMPS: THE VANISHING

Unlikely to grow on you

★★☆☆☆

UK/US: **Disney+, streaming now**

- Showrunner **Hilary Winston**
- Cast **David Schwimmer, Jayden Bartels, Sam McCarthy, Galilea La Salvia**

"Oh my gawd, is that an *SFX* reader? Ew, like, gross."

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **The reason the** original *Goosebumps* novels and '90s TV show are still remembered fondly is because they were spooky. Yes, they were for kids, but they were still meant to be scary; short, snappy stories that sent a shiver down your spine or, y'know, *gave you goosebumps*.

That's why the first Disney+ series didn't quite feel like *Goosebumps*, and it's why this one feels even less RL Stine-y. It's just... not creepy. Despite episode titles borrowed from the books, the monsters of the week are beside the point. This eight-episode run tells one overarching story, and none of it is scary.

Twins Devin (Sam McCarthy) and Cece (Jayden Bartels) are staying with their dad (David Schwimmer) in Brooklyn for the summer. He's a bit of a sad sack, haunted by the unexplained disappearance of his older brother when he was a teenager, and more interested in weird botanical experiments than in people.

Then new plant-shaped evidence on his brother's case comes to light, and the twins and their posse of assorted teenage misfits find themselves tasked with solving a decades-old mystery... and saving the world.

Storywise, there's a lot of ground to cover, but the main plot keeps getting elbowed off the screen in favour of tepid teenage relationship drama. It's a bizarre choice, considering the original books were very much about kids and not teenagers, but then this whole series feels a bit half-baked. Who's the target audience? It's too silly for actual teenagers, but there are subplots about the adults and a big dollop of conflicted '90s nostalgia that surely kids today aren't bothered about.

Nothing about it really works, least of all the dodgy CG goo effects. Schwimmer's performance is the highlight, but when botany-based dad jokes are the most memorable part of your *Goosebumps* show, something's gone badly wrong. **Sarah Dobbs**

i The retro tune played on the radio in the show's haunted car is "Chop Suey!" by System Of A Down. Feel old yet?

VIDEO NASTY Series One

VHS tracking

★★★½☆

UK **BBC Three, now streaming on iPlayer**

- Creator **Hugh Travers**
- Cast **Justin Daniels Anene, Cal O'Driscoll, Leia Murphy, Valerie O'Connor**

In the '80s, everyone had massive backpacks.

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Loosed into the** world by the Beeb with little fanfare (it speaks volumes when a new TV show doesn't even have a Wikipedia page), this easily digestible comedy-drama dramatises the '80s moral panic over video nasties, blending *Hot Fuzz* and series like *The End Of The F***ing World* and *This Town*.

Kicking off in Dublin, it follows outsider teens Billy (Justin Daniels Anene) and Con (Cal O'Driscoll), who've taken on the challenge of watching all 72 entries on the Director of Public Prosecutions' list of films deemed to violate the Obscene Publications Act. Acquiring the final VHS entails a trip to Derbyshire to trade with a fellow gorehound – with Con's sister Zoe (Leia Murphy, who steals the show with her sparky delivery of potty-mouthed barbs) in tow. Once they get there, things get increasingly complicated, as the trio become entangled in the machinations of a self-appointed moral guardian clearly inspired by Mary Whitehouse.

While we could nitpick the odd detail (the term "folk horror" wasn't in common use in 1985), writer Hugh Travers knows his onions, or has done his research (one plot point is explained via reference to 1977 public information film "Apaches"). Director Christopher Smith (*Creep, Severance, Black Death*) unquestionably does – a couple of scenes neatly nod to the lurid lighting used by the likes of Mario Bava. And as the series gradually shifts from a teen relationship drama into something more resembling full-blown horror, there are some effective twists.

While the central trio's dynamic is well drawn, there's arguably a little too much touchy-feely stuff once the relationship problems of Con's parents (soon on the kids' trail) are factored in. And the series may have benefited from being a little more explicit – compared to fellow BBC Three show *Wreck*, *Video Nasty* feels pretty tame, a peculiar state of affairs considering the subject matter. Still, it's a charming effort, one which may well turn a new generation on to the gruesome pleasures of *Nightmares In A Damaged Brain* et al. **Ian Berriman**

i Justin Daniels Anene (Billy) is also a professional wrestler, who likes to call himself The Killmonger. *Ooh, scary.*

"No, I can't move my arms. But just *look* at me!"

SECTION 31

Emperor State Of Mind

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15+ | SVOD

Director **Olatunde Osunsanmi**

Cast **Michelle Yeoh, Omari Hardwick, Kacey Rohl, Sam Richardson, Sven Ruygrok, Robert Kazinsky**

PARAMOUNT+ **You may well bridle** at *Section 31* if you're a dyed-in-the-wool *Star Trek* traditionalist, because this is the anti-*Next Generation*: a numbskull actionfest that has zero interest in high-minded philosophising over important ethical issues.

It's 27 years now since *Deep Space Nine* producer Ira Steven Behr devised Starfleet's clandestine black ops division, who do the dirty work the likes of Jean-Luc Picard could never countenance. This kinetic, explosive streaming movie, set in the 23rd century, takes the morally grey intelligence agency and gives them the *Suicide Squad* treatment. Cue squabbling, stabbings, torture, endless waspish quips, and a score laced with rock guitar riffs.

We last saw Philippa Georgiou, former Emperor of the Mirror Universe's Terran Empire, at the tail end of *Discovery* season three. Here she's tracked down and pressganged into One Last Mission as part of a team investigating reports of a bioweapon up for sale – a MacGuffin which turns out to be a device Georgiou herself commissioned, capable of destroying an entire quadrant.

Our squad of anti-heroes includes Alok (Omari Hardwick), a human from the past; Garrett (Kacey Rohl), the token by-the-book Starfleet type; Quasi (Sam Richardson), a shapeshifting Chameloid; Zeph (*EastEnders* alumni Robert Kazinsky), a power suit-clad "Mech"; Sven Ruygrok's Vulcan Fuzz, whose cracked emotionality turns out to have a very leftfield explanation; and Deltan seductress Melle (Humberly Gonzalez).

Not all of these characters will survive to the end, and it is genuinely difficult to predict who will make it – or who can be trusted – which helps to foster a sense of high stakes. Mind you, there's also a recurring sense of easy fixes. Lose one spaceship? Don't worry – there's another one sitting around just over the hill...

As a team, they're something of a mixed bag. Bewilderingly, at no point on the mission does Quasi use his shapechanging abilities to impersonate someone, which leaves Richardson feeling like a

spare limb. The suit which allows Zeph to repeatedly crash through walls looks rather naff (like a cosplayer's homemade Borg outfit), and is hard to rationalise; at this point in the future, wouldn't nanobots simply rebuild damaged body parts?

But the most grating member is Fuzz, whose sing-song Irish accent seems to have been honed by bingeing flashback episodes of *Angel* featuring David Boreanaz doing his worst. At no point does he actually trill "Begorrah!" or "Top o' the mornin' to ya!", but the character's every line borders on an international incident.

Featuring costuming that outdoes *Picard* episode "Stardust City Rag" – expect copious leather, blue wigs, life-threatening heels and ridiculously pointy shoulders – *Section 31* is surely the most archly camp artefact in this universe's entire 59-year history. It's also, by its very nature, the least strait-laced.

Everyone speaks in a sardonic 21st century demotic, spitting out phrases like "Does it come with fries?", "Cool your boots", "Your momma" and "Meh". The result is that despite appearances by the aforementioned familiar races – as well as an Andorian and, rather puzzlingly, a Cheronian (shouldn't they be extinct?) – it often doesn't feel very much like you're watching *Star Trek*.

Still, it bears repeating that despite the '70s retconning designed to burnish Gene Roddenberry's status, action has always been a vital component of the franchise. There's a reason that "fight music" cue is so iconic; back in the '60s, we could expect Captain Kirk to get his shirt ripped in a punch-up on a regular basis.

> **There's something to be said for trying out new tones**

And here at *SFX* we're old enough to remember the early-'00s, when we routinely whinged about how bland and samey *Trek* had become, in large part thanks to a drama-sapping lack of inter-crew conflict. That is certainly not a charge you can lay at the feet of *Section 31*.

There's something to be said for trying out new tones and new flavours. And while an entire series following this ragtag team would almost certainly have got wearying – even a second standalone movie might be pushing it – as a one-off, it's a decent amount of undemanding fun, and barrels along at such a pace that it never threatens to outstay its welcome.

You may just need to dial your brain down to 40% processing power – and extract the stick from your posterior... **Ian Berriman**

i A one-shot *Section 31* comic featuring Philippa Georgiou, published by IDW, is due for release on 5 February.

Family photos used to be a real hit and miss affair.

THE GIFT

Soul witness

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2000 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Sam Raimi**

Cast **Cate Blanchett, Keanu Reeves, Katie Holmes, Giovanni Ribisi**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This paranormal** suspenser plays like a Southern-fried take on *Eyes Of Laura Mars*, as Cate Blanchett's widowed psychic experiences visions linked to a small-town murder.

For the most part director Sam Raimi restrains his hyperkinetic tendencies to service a story that's as much concerned with local infidelity and courtroom drama as the otherworldly. You can sense the relish he brings to the psychic sequences, with their memorable jolts of uncanny imagery. Raimi also draws strong performances from a top-flight cast, not only the reliably brilliant Blanchett but Keanu Reeves, persuasively monstrous as an abusive husband.

For all its misty bayou atmosphere, though, this extrasensory whodunnit never quite succeeds as a murder mystery. In a sense it's undone by its own, intriguing premise: with everything revealed on the astral plane there's no truly compelling detective work required.

> **In a sense it's undone by its own premise**

Extras This Arrow Video edition has complementary commentaries by movie scholars Alexandra Heller-Nicholas and Josh Nelson plus critic Meagan Navarro, along with a chance to savour Christopher Young's score on a music and effects track.

Actor Chelcie Ross is interviewed (six minutes), while editors Bob Murawski and Arthur Coburn recall their competing cuts (13 minutes). Young, meanwhile, discusses both the music and his creative bond with Raimi (eight minutes).

Archival material includes original promo featurettes (27 minutes total) and interviews (15 minutes total). There's also a brief taste of the red carpet at the film's premiere (five minutes). Plus: a tie-in music video; trailers; TV and radio spots; booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

i Cate Blanchett's character drives the Delta 88 Oldsmobile that's made many appearances in Sam Raimi movies.

STREET TRASH

Kill The Poor

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 17 FEBRUARY

2024 | 18 | Blu-ray/download

Director **Ryan Kruger**

Cast **Sean Cameron Michael, Donna Cormack-Thomson, Joe Vaz**

Given its gang-rape scenes and multifarious slurs, you surely couldn't make Jim Muro's deliberately offensive "melt movie" *Street Trash* nowadays. In reviving the title, South African director Ryan Kruger hasn't.

In the original, bums go boom after swigging decades-old bottles of booze, erupting in fountains of dayglo goo. Kruger's near-future take, set in Cape Town, sees a Mayor weaponising samples from "the New York incident" to exterminate the homeless. The gore effects are just as grotesque – though there's an over-reliance on dye-filled balloons, and characters inexplicably clawing their own faces off.

The 1987 movie had a weirdly fragmented storyline. So the street people vs The Man throughline here – which allows Kruger to populate the story with a found family of disreputable but likeable misfits – is an upgrade.

But while this version isn't watch-with-Gran material (well, unless she's blasé about on-screen castration and horny puppets), its emotional interludes almost render it *too* palatable. If the original is like knocking back methylated spirits, this one's more like fishing an unfinished alcopop out of a litter bin.

Extras Director's commentary; deleted scenes; EPK material; music video; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

The Usual Suspects and *X-Men* director Bryan Singer worked on the original *Street Trash* as a grip (camera technician).

"Doctor, I think I might be allergic to Ribena."

GRAFTED

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER **One for fans of *The Substance*,** this Kiwi horror melds *Eyes Without A Face* and *Face/Off*, grafting wince-inducing scenes onto a thematic musculature of the pressures to meet beauty standards and conform to a host culture.

As shy Chinese biochemistry student Wei continues her late father's work on skin grafts, Hweiling Ow's promising debut paints a darkly comic portrait of snowballing madness – one with some interesting details (such as the disgust Wei's New Zealand-born cousin feels toward her culture). **Ian Berriman**

RIPPY

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | DVD/download

A new entry in the niche genre of kangaroo horror, this Australian indie finds a young sheriff investigating a savage killing spree by a malevolent marsupial.

Undone by some goofy CG, it's an outback critter flick that clings to the well-worn story beats of the *Jaws* playbook. The punning title promises a cheekier ride than the film delivers, the tone leaping like a crazed roo between self-aware splatterfest and a more earnestly played exploration of combat trauma.

Extras None. **Nick Setchfield**

2073

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED 3 FEBRUARY/ OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

Documentarian Asif Kapadia crosses the streams with speculative fiction in this powerful polemic on the state of planet Earth.

Samantha Morton anchors the film as a woman struggling to survive in a dystopian 2073, but it's the contemporary talking heads (explaining how her future could come to pass) which provide the more compelling drama. Ultimately, though, *2073* bites off rather more than it can chew.

Extras None.

Richard Edwards

DARK MATCH

★★★½☆

RELEASED 31 JANUARY

2024 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER **Think pro wrestling** is "fake"? Well, things get pretty real in this surprisingly straight-faced horror. When a dodgy indie promoter accepts a booking for a series of "dark" matches at a private facility, he unwittingly sets his roster up for something truly shady...

You'll think you've got this film sussed, but it's smarter than it looks. Its puppyish enthusiasm for wrestling and un-elevated horror gives it a kind of weirdo charm, while baddie Chris Jericho shows off some of the charisma that made him a superstar. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE HAUNTED HOUSE OF HORROR

Stab Fab

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1969 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Michael Armstrong**

Cast **Frankie Avalon, Jill Haworth, Dennis Price, Richard O'Sullivan**

"Its heart was plucked out of it," bemoaned writer/director Michael Armstrong, finding a fittingly bloody analogy for the experience of making his debut horror film.

Filmed as *The Dark* and intended as a tough-minded satire of '60s youth, it was handed to another director and saddled with a kitsch title to match the faux-groovy final product.

Essentially it's a proto-slasher in Carnaby Street finery, as bored young thrill-seekers uncover a murderous secret among the rats, candles and cobwebs of a derelict manor house. There's a few too many fake-out scares, but for all its cheese factor and compromised vision this is an entertaining, often genuinely evocative watch. Incorrigible '60s-philes may just agree with lemon-jumpered star Frankie Avalon: "I think it's a gas."

Extras The latest addition to their Tigon Collection range, this 88 Films edition comes with a choice of audio commentaries, pairing critics Kim Newman and Sean Hogan/Troy Howarth and Nathaniel Thompson respectively.

An impressively thorough retrospective from 2019 draws insights from Armstrong along with surviving cast and crew (91 minutes), while a fresh interview with the director (32 minutes) shows his treatment by the studio – "One of the great scandals of filmmaking" – clearly remains an open wound.

Other new interviews include assistant editor Jonathan Morris (four minutes) and "Party Guest" Mel Churcher (four minutes). An agreeably lurid trailer for the US release, repackaged as *Horror House*, is worth a spin to hear what sounds very much like Vincent Price extolling "An orgy of horror" that "makes maddening music on your nerve-strings!"

Plus: UK trailer; gallery; a booklet with notes by Armstrong. **Nick Setchfield**

"Look, I've told you I don't want to do a selfie."

TIGON/RGA/RGR COLLECTION/MARY EVANS / ALAMY

i David Bowie was originally in the frame for the role of Richard, having worked with Armstrong on 1969 short "The Image".

THE CELL

Psychiatric Voyage

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2000 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Tarsem Singh**

Cast **Jennifer Lopez, Vince Vaughn, Vincent D'Onofrio, Marianne Jean-Baptiste**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Unquestionably** the most curious entry in cinema's serial killer craze of the '90s, this flamboyant, hallucinatory horror sees Jennifer Lopez use high-tech gizmology to enter the mindscape of a maniac, searching for clues to the location of his latest victim.

Arch visualist Tarsem Singh brings his signature style to the fantasy sequences, creating an aesthetic that's halfway between Clive Barker torture-porn and the hyperreal photography of David LaChapelle. It's imaginatively nasty stuff, an MTV vision of Hell, and if at times the art overwhelms the terror then at least this impressive new restoration ensures the extraordinary production design looks more stunning than ever.

Extras Arrow Video's two-disc set offers theatrical and director's cuts – reinserting footage deemed too strong for America – along with a previously unseen full-frame presentation, newly graded by original director of photography Paul Laufer.

An excellent longform interview with a barefoot and engagingly wired Tarsem Singh (90 minutes) finds him unrepentant about pushing the content of the film. Paul Laufer has his own interview that's heavy on the finer detail of the cinematography (43 minutes), and he introduces the new alternate cut in equally technically-minded fashion (11 minutes).

Elsewhere film scholar Alexandra Heller-Nicholas traces the film's intriguing connections to classical and contemporary art (12 minutes), while fellow critic Abby Bender salutes the theatrical work of genius costume designer Eiko Ishioka (10 minutes).

There are no fewer than four audio commentaries from cast, crew and critics, including a newly recorded track with screenwriter Mark Protosevich. Archival material includes a promotional featurette with cast and crew (12 minutes), deep dives into six key effects sequences (69 minutes total) and eight deleted scenes with optional Singh commentary (18 mins total). Plus: trailers; gallery; booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

"Look, I've told you I don't want to do a selfie."

i Look out for a brief glimpse of classic French animated SF movie *Fantastic Planet* (1973), seen playing on a TV.

CAPTAIN KRONOS: VAMPIRE HUNTER

Time For Heroes

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1974 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Brian Clemens**

Cast **Horst Janson, John Carson, Shane Briant, Caroline Munro**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **In the face of** growing public indifference, in the late '60s/early '60s Hammer tried to lure the audience back with nudity and gore. *The Avengers* veteran Brian Clemens, however, took another tack: *fresh ideas*.

Overlooked at the time, this playful, swashbuckling makeover of vampirism stars German actor Horst Janson (dubbed by Brit Julian Holloway) as the titular dashing soldier, who (aided by his hunchbacked sidekick) visits a village plagued by mystery deaths.

The script puts numerous amusing twists on the lore: here the vampire drains lifeforce, leaving its victims horribly aged. Most eccentrically, its presence can be detected using dead toads. Bury one in a box; if a vampire passes by, it'll be revived!

It was Clemens's only feature directing credit. That's a crying shame, as he was clearly a natural. The film is replete with eye-pleasing compositions, with foreground objects – a blasted tree trunk; a sword stuck in the ground – providing impressive depth.

Add a stirring theme by Laurie Johnson, some opulent sets, and strong supporting performances by the likes of Caroline Munro (as a free-spirited gypsy girl) and you have an underappreciated gem.

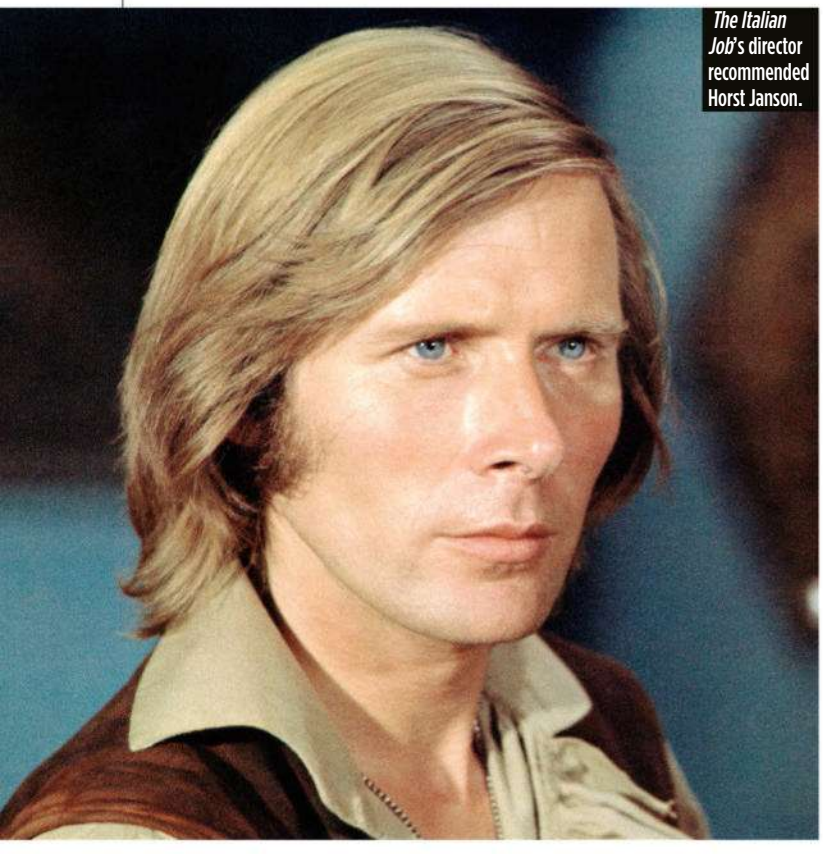
Extras This lavish five-disc Collector's Edition (three Blu-ray discs, two 4K) offers three versions: the 1.66:1 UK theatrical cut, an Academy ratio "as filmed" version, and the 1.85:1 US release. All have intros and commentaries (five in all, one – by Munro and Clemens's sons Sam and George – brand new). Our picks: writer Bruce G Hallenbeck's detailed 2020 track, and a 2011 team-up between Clemens and his DoP.

Superb new doc "The House Of Clemens" (57 minutes) sees Toby Hadoke staying at the family home, speaking to the writer's widow and sons and getting the guided tour. A heartwarming piece with many delightful treats – like a peek into filing cabinets which include a story concept for *Doctor Who* – it conveys a vivid impression of Clemens the man.

> **"The script puts numerous amusing twists on the lore"**

In a 2020 featurette, horror mavens Kim Newman and Stephen Jones have a rambling chat about Hammer's '70s output (33 minutes). A 2008 reunion event piece (27 minutes) snatches time with Clemens and six cast. Of four archival interviews (134 minutes) three are festival Q&As; an hour-long chat with Clemens conducted by his *Bugs* collaborator Stephen Gallagher is the pick.

One booklet (136 pages) offers interviews and articles; a second (100 pages) *Kronos* strips from '70s magazine *The House Of Hammer*. Plus: an extensive gallery (it plays for 27 minutes!); trailers; radio spots, textless titles; UK censor card; a poster; eight art cards. Hugely impressive. **Ian Berriman**



The Italian Job's director recommended Horst Janson.

EVERETT COLLECTION INC / ALAMY

Peter Jackson is a big fan of *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter*. As a teenager, he shot his own Super 8 version of the film.

ROUGE

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1988 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Stanley Kwan**

Cast **Anita Mui, Leslie Cheung, Alex Man, Yuen Irene Wan**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This Hong Kong** ghost story may have stemmed from Jackie Chan's stable Golden Way Films, but is free of dramatic stunts. It could have been different if his suggestions had been incorporated. Thankfully they were not.

It centres on the doomed love between a 1930s courtesan (Anita Mui's Fleur) and the heir to a trading company (Leslie Cheung's Chan). Chan's parents block a marriage, leading to a suicide pact. Fifty years later, Fleur's ghost returns to seek out the lover she's been waiting for in Hell, enlisting the help of two news reporters, and placing an ad in the paper.

Why everyone's convinced this gambit will pay off is one of a few troubling plot points, but it remains a poignant tale, one which wistfully juxtaposes the Hong Kong of 1987, with its supermarkets and trams, with the city Fleur remembers.

The payoff is a tad anticlimactic, but the mystery of Chan's fate makes for a gripping hook. The main selling point is Mui, who – resplendent in a variety of floral-patterned '30s dresses – is utterly radiant as the yearning, soulful ghost.

Extras A recent interview with director Stanley Kwan (21 minutes) has useful insights (like Chan's aforementioned "brilliant ideas"), but rendered rather hard work by his accent. An additional archival chat (12 minutes) is blessedly subtitled. Plus: trailer; gallery; booklet.

Ian Berriman

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *The Front Room* • *Heretic* • *The Lord Of The Rings: The War Of The Rohirrim* *Nightbitch* (Disney+ exclusive) • *Rebellious* • *Wicked*

ESCAPE FROM THE 21ST CENTURY

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED 24 FEBRUARY

2024 | TBC | Blu-ray/download

Director **Yang Li**

Cast **Ruoyun Zhang, Elane Zhong, Yang Song, Leon Lee**

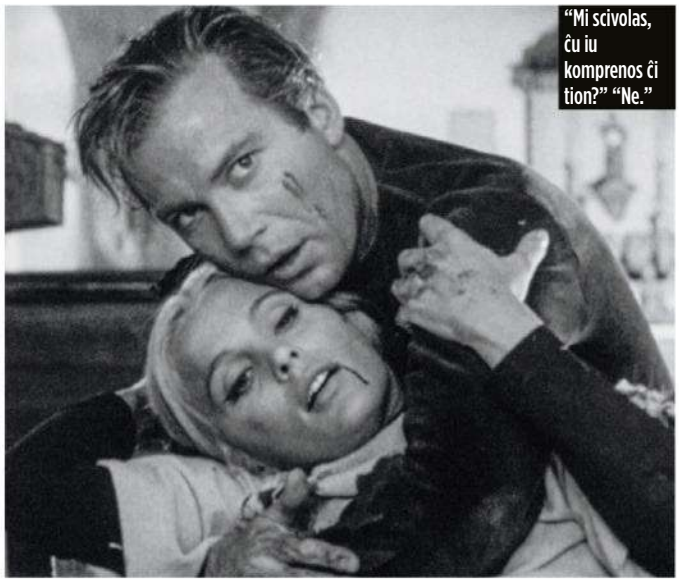
For this Chinese time-travel caper, writer Yang Li seems to have rummaged through off-cuts from Western works. It channels everything from *Scott Pilgrim* (animation mixing with live action, particularly during fight sequences) to *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (different realities colliding) by way of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* (pop-ups explaining random concepts to the viewer). The result is amusing, yes, but it's like blending an entire four-course meal into one smoothie.

On a faraway planet that resembles Earth, we meet three schoolkids in 1999, who fall into a lake of industrial waste and develop the ability to travel to the present day with a sneeze. As they "a-tish-oo" between past and present bodies and try to influence events in the 2020s, we're treated to an apocalypse, epic fights, training montages, violence, slapstick, romance and animated psychedelic drug trips.

While entertaining in short bursts, watching the whole thing at once is a bit like running alongside a train when your coat is stuck in the doors: you'll end up out of breath, annoyed and possibly injured.

A valiant effort, then, but only if you enjoy watching 10 films played at double-speed slapped into one.

Extras None. **Jayne Nelson**



"Mi scivolas, ĉu iu komprenos ĉi tion?" "Ne."

INCUBUS

Speech impediment

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1966 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Leslie Stevens**

Cast **William Shatner, Allyson Ames, Ann Atmar, Eloise Hardt**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A must-see for** William Shatner fans, this curio (filmed a year before he pulled on Kirk's gold tunic*) gave him quite a challenge, being scripted in international language Esperanto.

Writer/director Leslie Stevens was fresh from the cancellation of his anthology show *The Outer Limits*. Cinematographer Conrad Hall would later tot up 10 Oscar nominations – and three wins.

The simple story feels folkloric: a manichean struggle set around a village that's a hunting ground for demons. Succubus Kia (Allyson Ames) targets a noble soldier. But Marc (Shatner) maintains his piety, and a male counterpart is summoned to take revenge...

Shot entirely on location (mostly within nature), it's a faintly surreal, atmospheric affair which recalls Ingmar Bergman's work, and has some striking shots – like Shatner descending a slope, framed through three windows.

Shatner and Ames sell the emotion. Still, knowing the cast are mouthing a tongue they can't speak does raise suspicions that shots where characters stand at 90 degree angles (as if in an ABBA video) were designed to facilitate the use of cue cards.

Extras Only one French print survives. Choose an Academy ratio version with burnt-in French subtitles fully visible, or a matted widescreen one where the top of them occasionally intrudes.

An entertaining piece by genre historian Stephen Bissette (43 minutes) details other uses of Esperanto in cinema. A second talking head (22 minutes) provides a useful potted history of this fascinating linguistic experiment.

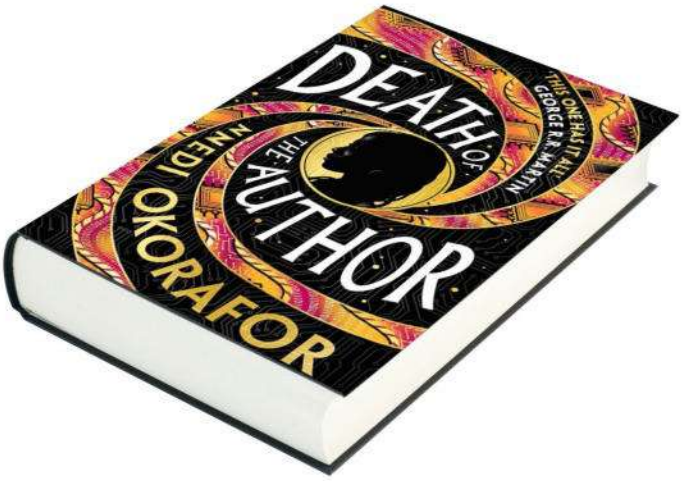
A chat with Hall, the cameraman and the producer (19 minutes) dates from 2001, as does a team-up commentary. So does one by Shatner himself, which is rather sparse but delightfully wry. *Outer Limits* expert David J Schow provides a comprehensive new track. Plus: isolated score; trailer; poster; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

ⓘ Milos Milos, who played the Incubus, killed Mickey Rooney's wife (with whom he'd been having an affair), then shot himself.

* DON'T WRITE IN, WE KNOW THE COSTUME WAS ACTUALLY GREEN...

ROUND UP

Recent theatrical releases landing on shiny disc include **SMILE 2** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), in which pop star Skye Riley (Naomi Scott) inherits the curse which causes people to commit suicide while grinning grotesquely. We said: "The pop milieu adds some glossy theatrics... But for all its bells and whistles, it's essentially a beat-for-beat reprise." Special features: director's commentary, deleted scenes and 48 minutes of featurettes. Sony's Spidey spin-off trilogy wraps up with **VENOM: THE LAST DANCE** (3 February, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD). This time Eddie Brock finds himself the prime suspect for the apparent murder of Detective Mulligan. Cue a cross-country road trip in order to clear his name. We said: "Every bit as resoundingly stupid and intermittently entertaining as the first two." Circa 40 minutes of Blu-ray bonuses include 13 minutes of deleted scenes, previs material and bloopers. **THE WILD ROBOT** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) follows Roz, a robot designed to serve humans which falls onto an unpopulated island, where it adopts a gosling. We said: "Has sublime images, and the parenting story will have audiences blubbing." Plenty of bonuses here, including a couple of deleted scenes in storyboard form and kid-friendly stuff like a "how to draw Roz" piece. Finally, the latest TV box sets include *The Boys* spinoff **GEN V** Season One (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), **HAWKEYE** Season One (out now, 4K/Blu-ray), **LOKI** Season Two (out now, 4K/Blu-ray), and **STAR WARS: AHSOKA** Season One (10 February, 4K/Blu-ray).



DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

Africanfuturism's meta guru

★★★★☆

RELEASED 20 FEBRUARY
448 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Nnedi Okorafor**
Publisher **Gollancz**

It's one of the clichés of literary fiction that a first novel should be rich in autobiographical elements. Only later, when the writer has learnt more about the craft, will they step away from their own lives in earnest. This is, of course, an exaggeration, but there's a grain of truth in it.

Science fiction, by contrast, is less awash with overtly autobiographical fiction: SF writers don't live in the future or travel off-planet. SF writers, again to generalise madly, are more likely to weave autobiography into their fiction later in life, perhaps when they're taking stock.

All of which we mention because, ever unconventional, Nnedi Okorafor's latest novel – a book written by someone in the prime of her career – contains strong elements of autobiography. It's also a book she's been waiting to have the confidence and chops to write, an exercise in slipstream metafiction dealing with big questions – the nature of consciousness and the power of the stories we tell – and featuring two interweaving narratives.

One of those narratives focuses on Zelu, an American-Nigerian literary novelist whose life hits a crisis when she loses her university job and a book is rejected. This is not supposed to happen to a member of a high-achieving family.

Zelu, a youngest child who is disabled following an accident that occurred when she was still a schoolgirl, is thrown back on the mercies of people who all too often scold her. Okorafor herself is a youngest daughter, and a former athlete who had to learn to walk again because of rare side effects following a routine operation to correct her scoliosis.

But in her bleakest moment, Zelu finds a way forward when she begins to write a science fiction novel about a post-human world, *Rusted Robots*. It's a bestseller that will make her rich and a public figure. It's also the book that will enable her to walk again as her fame means (mild spoiler alert) she's selected to be fitted with an experimental exoskeleton.

Throughout these sections of the book, there's a real warmth. For all that Zelu's family are overbearing, over-protective and unreasonable, they're also loving, loyal and – with a little persuasion and following the odd argument – prepared to listen.

The second narrative is that of *Rusted Robots*, in which the fates of an android, Ankara, and an AI "NoBody", Ijele, become linked. This profoundly shapes them both and, at a time of war between different stripes of post-human intelligences, will come to shape the future. A story that begins bleakly gradually builds. It says much about the power of Okorafor's writing that, as a reader, you come to identify as strongly with Ankara and Ijele as you do with Zelu.

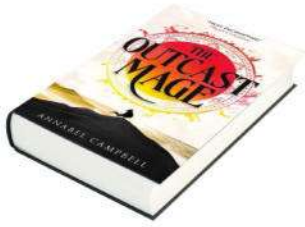
> **Slipstream metafiction dealing with big questions**

There are times when Zelu's company becomes wearisome. Granted, because of her place in her family, Zelu has to struggle to assert her independence, but the book arguably shows this struggle too often from her perspective. Chapters set out as interviews where other characters reflect on events sometimes come as a relief.

Nevertheless, there's far more to admire here than criticise. In particular, the structure of the novel represents a literary high-wire act, and Okorafor never looks like losing her balance. By the time you realise how the book's connected narratives fit together – and they do, beautifully – don't be surprised if you find yourself admiring Okorafor for her sheer chutzpah.

Jonathan Wright

i An origin story for the AI character Ijele, "Abracadabra", was recently published in *New Scientist*. Read it at bit.ly/nnedistory.



THE OUTCAST MAGE

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
448 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Annabel Campbell**
Publisher **Orbit Books**

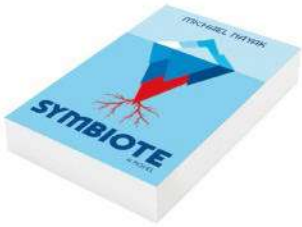
A populist leader, an authoritarian justice system, a persecuted outcast community, riots, natural disasters... it's a mystery where writers get their ideas from.

The privileged city-state of Amoria thrives beneath its vast glass dome, but tensions are rising between the ruling mage class and the non-magical poorer folk. Our heroine is Naila, who has glimmers of a gift but doesn't know how to use it.

Powerful wizard Haelius commits to training her, but political conspiracy, foreign spies and mysterious crop deaths threaten to destabilise everything around them. And we're teased with glimpses of hunters tracking a destructive beast across the desert beyond the walls.

The allegory in Annabel Campbell's debut novel feels very pertinent in today's troubled global climate, if a little on the nose. Campbell conjures up a few fresh twists on magical fantasy tropes, using them to mirror contemporary concerns.

Some of the building blocks are overly familiar, and the story takes time to find its momentum. However, the central pair are likeable, memorable characters, and when calamity strikes in the third act, Campbell reveals that she can write pacey fight scenes too. **Dave Bradley**



SYMBIOTE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **11 FEBRUARY**
406 pages | **Paperback/ebook**
Author **Michael Nayak**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

Author Michael Nayak once spent a "summer" at the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station, one of the most remote and inhospitable places on Earth. His debut novel was conceived during that Antarctic adventure, and that first-hand experience gives *Symbiote* an evocative – and chilly – sense of place.

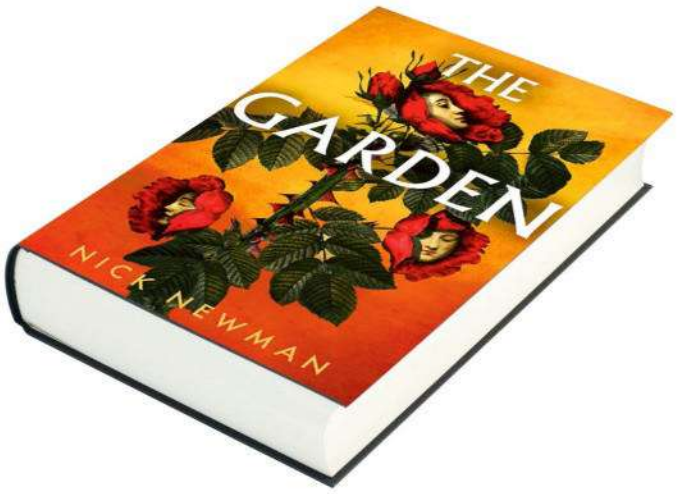
If you've ever wondered what it's like to live in a community of 40 people, surrounded by permanent darkness in a landscape so hostile it can kill you in seconds, this does an excellent job of taking you there.

In a near-future where the US is at war with China, the "Polies" have to deal with a contagion that thrives in extreme cold, turning anyone infected into a bloodthirsty killer – a notable development on a continent where no murder has ever been recorded.

Unfortunately, any sci-fi survival thriller set on a polar base is destined to be compared with John Carpenter's *The Thing*, and in this context the book falls short. Nayak has fun creating novel symptoms and cures, yet never escapes the confines of familiar "enemy within" tropes.

But *Symbiote*'s biggest problem is the unwieldy size of its cast; had the book narrowed its focus, it would be a lot easier to empathise with those trapped in harm's way when things inevitably go south (pole).

Richard Edwards



THE GARDEN

SFX Loves

Cult(ivating) sisters

★★★★★

RELEASED **30 JANUARY**
288 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Nick Newman**
Publisher **Doubleday**

Very often, SF is a genre of giant vistas: of starships that take generations to reach their destination, of wars that convulse entire galaxies, and of posthuman evolution millions of years into the future. But it's equally good at taking a tiny and apparently mundane setting, and turning it into something jarringly, alienatingly strange.

With the exception of a brief epilogue, *The Garden* is completely set in a single garden. True, it's the garden of a stately home, and so considerably less tiny than any lawn most of us have ever had to mow. But for its gardeners, sisters Evelyn and Lily, its fruit trees and vegetable patches and beehives are the whole world.

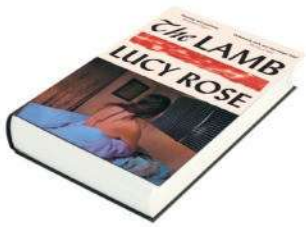
They haven't set foot beyond its crumbling wall since childhood; many decades later, their knowledge of what's out there is built almost entirely from fearful imagination. Holed up in the kitchen of their old home – the rest of the house is a barricaded ruin that they regard with superstitious dread – the sisters' lives are ruled by the routines established by their late, formidable mother, and the increasingly unreliable rhythms of the seasons.

> **"An uneasy and brilliantly drawn folie à deux"**

They are, in short, very set in their deeply weird ways. The result is an uneasy and brilliantly drawn folie à deux. It's like Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived In The Castle*, except that here, the "castle" is surrounded by climate change, rather than a judgemental small town. And, as in Jackson's story, the arrival of an outsider throws everything off-balance.

Nick Newman dives deep into the sisters' way of life, peeling back the layers of delusions and lies with a slow, careful artistry. The atmosphere is ever more suffocating, and every little thing feels ripe with potential violence. You won't get all the answers – on some issues, Newman is content to fire up readerly imagination and then step back to let it burn – but you will have a properly intense reading experience. **Nic Clarke**

i Newman (real name Nicholas Bowling) is also a musician: he's played bass for soul/folk artist Me For Queen.



THE LAMB

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **30 JANUARY**
336 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **Lucy Rose**
Publisher **Weidenfeld & Nicolson**

You've probably seen enough movies to be wary of going on long cross-country drives in rural Texas, in case your car breaks down in cannibal country. In rural Cumbria, though? Lucy Rose's debut novel suggests it's time to start worrying about what might be going on in the more remote parts of the UK...

Margot and her Mama keep to themselves. They eat what they can forage, or hunt, or otherwise lure into their storybook cottage in the woods. Like a stray hiker, for example: lost and tired, lulled into a false sense of security.

Careful only to eat the ones who won't be missed, the two of them manage to evade notice. Then Eden shows up: not lost, not fooled, wilder than either of them. Eden disturbs their cosy family dynamic, and suddenly Margot finds herself more prey than predator.

Rose's writing is poetic, even lyrical, which doesn't quite seem to fit the perspective of an isolated, uneducated child. Her glacial pacing also makes the novel seem longer than it is. You'll need a lot of patience, and the willingness to majorly suspend your disbelief – particularly in the final few chapters. With some effort, though, you'll find an affecting tragedy at the heart of this nasty little story, as three women try desperately to fill the emptiness in their hearts by filling their bellies.

Sarah Dobbs

A rough giving some guidance for Carlos Ezquerra.

Note the "DON'T draw rest of helmet."

COVER STORY: THE 2000 AD DESIGN ART OF ROBIN SMITH

Rough Justice

★★★★☆

RELEASED 13 FEBRUARY

176 pages | Paperback

Authors **Robin Smith, Karl Stock**

Publisher **Rebellion**

There's a specific art to making a striking comic book cover, and *2000 AD* has been doing it weekly for the past 47 years. This new volume takes an in-depth look at the cover art process via the work of Robin Smith, who was art editor of *2000 AD* during one of its most creatively fertile periods.

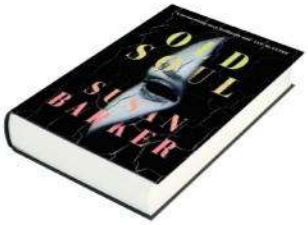
Between 1980 and 1985, Smith was responsible for getting the right cover illustrations from legendary artists like Brian Bolland, Dave Gibbons and Carlos Ezquerra. Smith would generate the eye-catching rough layouts for each piece, and that's what we see here, alongside finished covers featuring the likes of Judge Dredd, Rogue Trooper and Strontium Dog, providing a fascinating snapshot into their behind-the-scenes development.

This is all accompanied by comments from Smith himself (interviewed by Karl Stock), who takes us through his interactions with the artists, the various ups and downs of production, and commercial necessities like making room on the covers for attaching free gifts.

It's a genial, engaging portrait of the times, while also brilliantly showcasing the covers themselves, and Smith's part in their evolution. For those with a nostalgic fondness for '80s British comics, or a general interest in the process of comic cover design, this is an engaging and characterful journey through *2000 AD*'s wild early history.

Saxon Bullock

i A fan of PG Wodehouse, for a while Nigel Smith signed things as Psmith, after his character Rupert Psmith.



OLD SOUL

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

304 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Susan Barker**

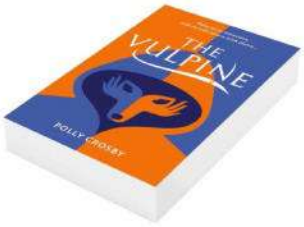
Publisher **Fig Tree**

As serial killer calling cards go, even the Zodiac letters have nothing on this. Victims of Susan Barker's titular "old soul" are turned into their own mirror image. Facial features, random skin blemishes, entire limbs, even their internal organs: every single one is reversed.

Two people meet by chance in an airport when they both miss the same flight. Over consolatory drinks, Jake and Mariko learn that they have something horrible in common: each of them has lost a loved one in an uncannily similar way. Soon, Jake is joining the dots, turning up deaths over three continents and seven decades. In each case, witnesses remember a mysterious, dark-haired woman who was fixated on photographing the future victim.

It's in the mosaic of lives cut short that this novel really sings. Chapter by chapter, each of the lost is conjured up by a widow, or a son, or a best friend, even – or perhaps especially – when it's clear that they were misunderstood. Barker lets us read between the lines of memory and self-deception, deftly teasing out personalities and relationships that feel convincingly realistic and flawed.

If the rather convoluted fantastical horror underlying all this isn't quite as compelling, it's a testament to how startlingly vivid Barker's character work is. **Nic Clarke**



THE VULPINE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 16 JANUARY
368 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Polly Crosby**
Publisher **Scholastic**

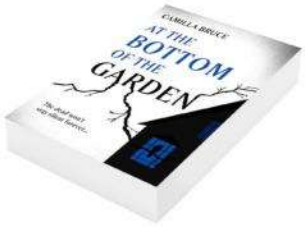
In this YA tale, life's great! If you're perfect, that is. But what of those who aren't? Those born blind or deaf, or missing a limb, or poorly in any way? They face one of two options: either their families drop them off at an enigmatic Hospital to be "rehabilitated" (spoiler: they won't be), or they wait around to be kidnapped by monsters called the Vulpine, dragged underground to who-knows-what fate. Basically, being different sucks.

Which is why young Ora is having a particularly sucky time when we meet her. After developing a lung condition, she's absolutely distraught at what lies in her future. She doesn't want to enter the Hospital, and is terrified of the fox-like Vulpine. But when they kidnap her friend's newborn sister, Ora realises that perhaps these creatures have another motive she doesn't understand... yet.

Ora makes a convincing protagonist and, unsurprisingly, the moral messaging here is on point. The plot skips merrily along and there's a lot to like about Polly Crosby's intricately thought-out world. Yet the Vulpine's fairy-tale scariness isn't given much room to breathe from the start, robbing the story of what should have been a fun edge of horror.

Without that fear factor, this is a familiar (if enjoyable) dystopian fable that doesn't add anything new to an already jam-packed genre.

Jayne Nelson



AT THE BOTTOM OF THE GARDEN

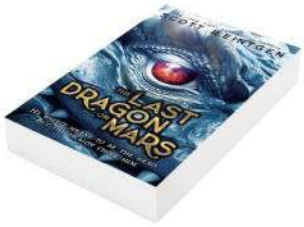
★★½☆☆

RELEASED 30 JANUARY
384 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Camilla Bruce**
Publisher **Magpie**

Unfortunately for recently orphaned sisters Lily and Violet, there aren't any cute little fairies at the bottom of their aunt's garden. Nope, in this YA-but-trying-to-pretend-it-isn't witchy tale, there's something much nastier down there: the furious ghost of a murder victim who needs the girls' help to get his revenge.

In chapters alternating between the perspectives of the girls and their aunt Clara, a story of intergenerational trauma unfolds. Resentful and bitter, Clara only agrees to take in the girls because she wants their inheritance – and when she discovers nine-year-old Violet can speak to the dead, quickly turns it into a money-making scheme. Thing is, some of those dead people have stories to tell of Clara's past misdeeds, and the more the girls learn to use their powers, the more dangerous things get.

Tonally, *At The Bottom Of The Garden* is bizarre. The prose skews young, even during the Clara chapters, but the abuse she puts the kids through is bleak. And the solution that the ghosts help the girls come up with, in order to escape...? The morality is beyond tangled, especially considering the age of the children involved, but it's presented like a happy ending. Maybe that explains the marketing positioning as adult fantasy, not YA – but it's hard to see who this is actually going to appeal to. **Sarah Dobbs**



THE LAST DRAGON ON MARS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 6 FEBRUARY
384 pages | Paperback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Scott Reintgen**
Publisher **Rock The Boat**

Mars is already a cool place, but if you want to make it even cooler, why not add a dragon? His name is Dread, and he's lurking in a secret military bunker with a group of teenagers training to be his space-faring crew.

Orphan Lunar Jones stumbles across Dread while scavenging the Martian desert. He's on the run not only from the local wildlife – desperate to kill every human on the planet – but also his fellow scavengers. The moment boy and dragon meet, they realise their destiny is to be together.

There's great universe-building from Scott Reintgen here: every planet and moon in his solar system has an accompanying dragon, and the beasts' relationships with both each other and humans are fascinating. He's also cooked up a meaty banquet of twists (including a tasty final-chapter dessert).

There are a few tiny issues. Even after a childhood spent fending for himself, Lunar's thought processes feel *way* too mature for him to be a mere 13 years old. And Reintgen's prose, filled with short, sharp sentences, can come off as severe. Female characters are also underdeveloped, disappointing in a modern YA novel. However, it's hard to go too wrong when you're writing about a bunch of battling space dragons. **Jayne Nelson**

REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks this month: **THREE EIGHT ONE** (★★★★★, 13 February) by Aliya Whiteley. Central to it is the story of Fairly, a young woman who leaves behind her village to travel

the "Horned Road", in a rite-of-passage quest. But that tale is embedded within another, as reading the text alongside us is a 24th-century historian. We said: "The sort of story whose shape and meaning keep shifting as you read... A wonderfully alienating experience." In Katherine Arden's **THE WARM HANDS OF GHOSTS** (★★★★½, 30 January, Penguin) a Canadian woman is informed that her brother's been declared missing on the Western Front, then returns to the frontline as a nurse, hoping to find

him. In flashbacks, we see said loved one coming into the clutches of a mysterious fiddle-player whose enchanted sanctuary is paid for in memories. We said: "A fantasy novel compelling both in its own right, and as a metaphor for the way this devastating conflict marked the death of so many old certainties." Finally, there's Robert Jackson Bennett's **THE TAINTED CUP** (★★★★½, 6 February, Hodderscape), the first entry in the series Shadow Of The Leviathan. Combining epic fantasy

with a murder mystery, it centres on two detectives in the Empire of Khanum, investigating the death of an Imperial official. We said: "Meticulously constructed with clues cunningly scattered throughout."

SCUTTLER'S COVE

★★★★☆

RELEASED 13 FEBRUARY

368 pages | Paperback/ebook

Authors **David Barnett**

Publisher **Canelo Horror**

It feels vaguely wrong to read this creepy little folk horror in the winter. Yes, it might send a shiver down your spine – but it's set in sunny Cornwall, at the height of summer. Still, it probably won't make you want to book a holiday there any time soon, so maybe that's for the best.

Thirty-something artist Merrin was born in the idyllic tourist trap of Scuttler's Cove, but she hasn't gone back since moving away to university. When her mother dies, she heads south – but gets a nasty shock when she discovers her inheritance is long spent.

Instead of moving into her childhood home, she ends up in the "affordable" side of a new housing development where wealthy Londoners are buying up holiday homes on a site formerly considered mystical. Of course, they don't know any better... or do they?

This is a follow-up, of sorts, to David Barnett's 2024 book *Withered Hill*. Not a sequel, but it's set in the same universe (explicitly so, by the end) and shares a lot of the same DNA. Like *Withered Hill*, this is a story of a woman battling societal expectations, both modern and ancient; like *Withered Hill*, there's something lurking in the woods, and a whole society built around exploiting it.

That's not a criticism, though – there's a rich vein of horror to be mined here, and Barnett's doing a great job of excavating it. **Sarah Dobbs**

GRAVE EMPIRE

★★★★☆

RELEASED 4 FEBRUARY

528 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Richard Swan**

Publisher **Orbit Books**

An undercurrent of eldritch horror flows through this first volume of Richard Swan's Great Silence trilogy.

It's set against an imposingly complex backdrop of competing nations, species and doctrines, where the afterlife is real but communication between the mortal and aethereal dimensions is strictly controlled. When the spirit realm inexplicably falls silent, Sovan ambassador Renata Rainer is dispatched to contact the Stygion, a race of magically adept mer-people, hoping they can provide answers.

Alongside his quest, the story is told from two additional perspectives: Peter Kleist, a lieutenant in the Sovan army, posted to a remote, untamed frontier; and Lamprecht von Oldenburg, an avaricious noble conducting illicit magical experiments.

Swan builds an oppressive sense of horror that only grows throughout the story. Rainer and Kleist's travels are populated not with wonders, but monstrous creatures lurking in the shadows, ghastly scenes of human sacrifice, and the bloody casualties of war.

It's an ambitious undertaking, but the scale of the plot is never allowed to overwhelm the emotional inner lives and struggles of the characters, while Swan cunningly maintains enough tantalising secrets to entice readers to return for the next epic instalment. **David West**

BLOB: A LOVE STORY

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 6 FEBRUARY

243 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Maggie Su**

Publisher **Sceptre**

The horrors of the modern dating scene are much discussed and lamented – so if you had a chance to craft the perfect mate from scratch, would you do it? Even if they literally started out as a watery blob on the ground?

That's the dilemma which faces college dropout Vi. Stuck in a job she despises, she's still grieving the loss of her ex, Luke, when she stumbles across the eponymous blob behind a nightclub. Taking it home, she soon learns that it responds to her instructions. It slowly develops into a full human, addicted to cereal and daytime TV, who Vi calls Bob. But Vi isn't necessarily the best person to possess that kind of power...

Vi herself is an interesting and often very unlikeable character. While we can sympathise with her social struggles and issues of identity, she can also be viciously mean, lashing out at the few people who try to offer her friendship. Bob himself is much less clear – partly because Vi never really allows him to be a person of his own – and is really only a catalyst who helps Vi to realise that her life isn't working.

Despite some interesting ideas and choices, this remains a lightweight read that never truly grips or engages, and doesn't really make the most of its intriguing premise. **Rhian Drinkwater**

ALSO OUT

Howl's Moving Castle and Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver* are namechecked by the marketing blurb for Lauren Wiesebron's debut fantasy **THE HOUSE OF FROST AND FEATHERS** (out now, Hodderscape). Based on Slavic folklore, it follows a young woman who takes a job as an apprentice to notorious "koldunya" Baba Zima, working to find a cure for a sleeping sickness haunting the land. Isabel Agajanian's **MODERN DIVINATION** (30 January, Tor) centres on a witch studying at an elite Cambridge college. Someone is hunting her kind and stealing their powers, which prompts a team up with a classmate described as "dreadfully arrogant". Our money is on smoochies ensuing... In Neena Viel's weird horror debut **LISTEN TO YOUR SISTER** (4 February, Titan) a 25-year-old woman is plagued by nightmares of the deaths of her younger brothers (both under her guardianship). After the siblings are forced to go on the run to a cabin in the woods, the you-know-what hits the fan... **A CONVENTIONAL BOY** (out now, Orbit) is the thirteenth and penultimate entry in Charles Stross's Laundry Files series, centred on a British spy agency which deals with supernatural threats. Inspired by the Satanic Panic of the '80s, the titular novel is centred on a *D&D* fan who encounters a game that's really a ritual to summon a great evil. The book also includes two short stories. Finally, anime fans who fancy folding their own versions Totoro, Ponyo and No-Face should pick up **STUDIO GHIBLI ORIGAMI** (6 February, Insight Editions). It includes illustrated instructions suitable for beginners and comes with all the coloured sheets of paper you will need.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Olivie Blake

The author of the Atlas Trilogy is unrelenting, melonfarmer

What is your daily writing routine like?

At the beginning of my writing "career", before it could be reasonably ruled anything resembling a profession, I used to write for 12-14 hours a day. Which is why now, on a relatively normal day, I can drop off my toddler at preschool, sit down, enter the fugue state, produce my daily goal of 4,000-5,000 words, do 10 minutes of physical therapy to offset the aforementioned fugue state, and then pick him up right after lunch to go play Buzz Lightyear in the park.

Do you have any personal mementos on/near your desk?

A framed 8x10 of my son looking at me from a preschool portrait, a framed copy of Klimt's "The Kiss", a needlepoint of Tumblr user helloitsbees's seminal post "The horrors may be unrelenting but motherfucker so am I", and several breathtaking prints by my illustrators and collaborators Little Chmura, Polarts_, and Lasq.draws.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?

Creative blocks can mean something is in disarray internally, like self-doubt, or something is wrong craft-wise, which is usually that something you've already written isn't working. When I'm struggling to move forward, the problem is almost always behind me. Re: procrastination, I think it's worth asking yourself why you're procrastinating. After all, if you don't want to do it, then don't do it! The world is wide and possibilities to fill your time are endless! YOLO! But if you really *do* want to do it, then why not start now?

> **"At the beginning I used to write for 12-14 hours a day"**

Do you have any writing "bad habits"?

I'm a discovery writer – I don't know what a book is really about until after I've finished it, and if I know exactly how the story ends, I have no interest in writing it. In practice this means I have to draft quickly, uninterrupted, followed by revision periods that last two to three times as long.

Which is fine, but there are hazards of specific repeated flaws, like saggy middles or plot holes. To combat this, I try to pay close attention to stakes and motion – technically different from knowing the plot. Typically this means pausing at several points throughout the manuscript to force myself to interrogate what's coming next.

KAY ROXBY / ALAMY

Were you a keen reader as a child?

I would read anything on the SFF shelves at my local library, often without regard for whether it was appropriate for me. In terms of children's literature, I was a huge fan of Patricia C Wrede, Diana Wynne Jones and Tamora Pierce.

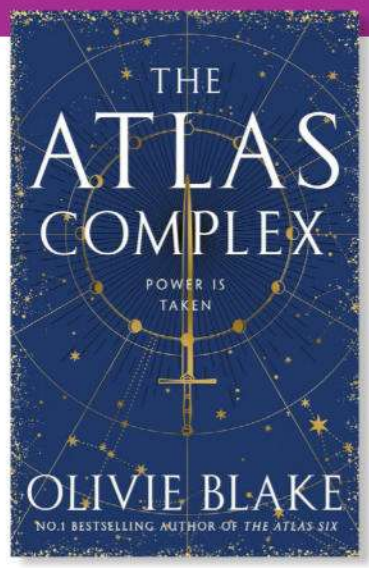
Wha's your desert island book?

Can I have four? The Neapolitan quartet by Elena Ferrante. I reread the series every year on my birthday.

What's the biggest misconception people have about being an author?

Sometimes I do have to fight for the time to write, even from my publisher. Because it was so arduous to get here, I often feel that if I don't do absolutely everything I'm asked, it can all so easily fall away.

In practice that means doing administrative tasks that take up the time I need to use on creative work for my own mental health. I often worry that pushing back might one day mean the end of everything, which is not even to mention social media or the necessity to be, on some level, an identity or even a brand.



The Atlas Complex is out in paperback on 30 January, published by Tor.

ABSOLUTE BATMAN

SFX Loves

The Axeman Cometh

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Scott Snyder**
Artist **Nick Dragotta**

ISSUES 1-3 **It'd be *very* easy to look** at DC's latest Batman title and think "Another alternate version of the Dark Knight? So what?" The Batman mythos has been remixed countless times, making it difficult to imagine there are fresh approaches left. But *Absolute Batman* is the unprecedented exception to the rule, and one of the most exciting superhero comics in a long while.

This is especially surprising since the pitch for DC's new Absolute universe – accessible new takes on classic characters – is similar to Marvel's current rebooted version of their Ultimate universe. However, DC have the edge in terms of adventurousness, considering how completely *Absolute Batman* up-ends everything we know about the Caped Crusader.

Most notably, Bruce Wayne is no longer the scion of Gotham's richest family – instead, he's a working-class city engineer whose father was killed in a mass shooting when he was a child.

Elsewhere, Jim Gordon is the embattled mayor of Gotham (and currently romancing Bruce's mother), most of the classic Batman rogues' gallery are now long-time childhood friends of Bruce, and Alfred Pennyworth is a hard-edged intelligence agent.

It's Alfred whose point of view we follow for much of the story, as he comes up against the mysterious Bat-themed vigilante who's taking on Gotham's latest crimewave. These opening three issues see Batman battling a lethal gang known as the Party Animals, led by the enigmatic Black Mask, but they also act as a full-throttle statement of intent.

Writer Scott Snyder is stripping out many of the character's inherited '30s pulp archetypes and instead going for a more modern approach, expanding the possibilities of what a Batman story can do. His work here is entertaining stuff that's full of twists and turns, while Nick Dragotta's art pushes what's already an enjoyable experiment into a jaw-dropping slam-dunk.

> **"Each outrageous set-piece has a sense of visual energy"**

Batman is reimagined as an axe-wielding man-mountain, and Dragotta's distinctive, heavily stylised approach to character design is matched by his unparalleled skill with high-octane action sequences.

Each outrageous set-piece has a sense of visual energy and impact that's reminiscent of manga classic *Akira*, while the story itself is already throwing a selection of intriguing moral quandaries at this new Bruce Wayne.

It's still very much a Batman comic, and anyone suffering from serious Dark Knight fatigue is unlikely to be won over. But for everyone else, this is a fantastic example of how much fun superhero reboots can be when they're done well.

Saxon Bullock

i One early idea (later dropped) was for Edward Nygma to help Bats design his equipment, including a nanotech cape.

FLASH GORDON

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Mad Cave Studios**
Writer **Jeremy Adams**
Artists **Will Conrad, Cliff Richards**

ISSUES 1-5 **Given Flash** Gordon's 1930s newspaper strip origins, this latest take on the square-jawed space hero strikes a neatly nuanced balance between pulpy storytelling and radical plot twists.

Jeremy Adams bravely frontloaded the big developments in last year's Free Comic Book Day issue zero, with Flash cleverly fooling Ming by faking his own death, only to inadvertently cause the destruction of planet Mongo – a devastating event that is, frankly, subsequently not explored enough.

So it feels like an unnecessary diversion when issue one opens with Flash imprisoned on the cornily named Planet Death, where he battles *Star Wars*-esque aliens in an arena before forming an inevitably short-lived alliance with Ming.

While there's no room for subtlety in his broad characterisation, there are some enlightening flashbacks to Ming's childhood, which provide insight into how he became a bombastic despot. But not much is resolved by issue five's first arc ending – although it does at least bring the first substantial appearance from now-Empress Dale Arden, and scientific advisor Zarkov also shows up in a changed form.

The art, mostly by Will Conrad, is solid, with plenty of intricate detail. With everything to play for in future issues, this Flash Gordon is most definitely alive with possibilities.

Stephen Jewell

JUDGE DREDD: A BETTER WORLD

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW**
Publisher **Rebellion**
Writers **Rob Williams, Arthur Wyatt**
Artists **Boo Cook, Jake Lynch, Henry Flint**

COLLECTION **For all their lurid** craziness and dark humour, Judge Dredd stories can pack a serious emotional punch when they want to. The latest example of this comes with *A Better World*, a collection of a recent *2000 AD* arc that finds a new angle to explore in the ultra-violent world of Mega-City One.

The plot revolves around a daring idea: what if the Justice Department's constant, no-holds-barred war on crime is itself part of the problem? In order to prove her theory, Judge Maitland is allowed a one-year experiment to see what happens when a single city sector puts its funds towards education and social programmes instead of Judges.

The experiment works, and crime rates plummet. But corrupt elements in the media and the Justice Department want to maintain the status quo at all costs, and events are soon heading in tragic directions.

This is *Judge Dredd* at its most political, but the affecting subtext never gets in the way of the sharply crafted storytelling or some wildly creative action set-pieces. All of this is brilliantly realised by the gorgeous art, and the whole package proves that even after almost 50 years, *Judge Dredd* remains a powerfully relevant sci-fi saga.

Saxon Bullock

I HOPED I WOULD SEE YOU, BUT I NEVER DREAMT IT WOULD BE TODAY.
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
Jeez man, at least pretend to be excited, woncha?

ABSOLUTE WONDER WOMAN

Hell Is For Heroes

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Kelly Thompson**
Artist **Hayden Sherman**

ISSUES 1-4 **One of the core** conceits of DC's freshly-minted Absolute Universe imprint is that life is much harder for the heroes in this parallel world. That's led to radical reinventions of Batman and Superman, but *Absolute Wonder Woman* takes a subtler – and arguably even more satisfying – approach.

This Diana was brought up not on Paradise Island, but in Hell, with Circe the witch (a longtime foe in the regular DC universe) reinvented as her loving protector. Cut to the present, and the adult Wonder Woman reveals her existence to a shocked world. While the US military are hesitant to trust this sword-wielding goddess on a skeletal pegasus, they're left with little choice when a swarm of monstrous kaiju emerges from the ocean.

Despite the character's harsh upbringing, writer Kelly Thompson and artist Hayden Sherman take almost an anti-grimdark approach to *Absolute Wonder Woman*. This Diana is very much the same beacon of hope and love that we already know, albeit with a few surprising secrets too.

Thompson's script is sharp and witty, but it's the killer combo of Sherman's art (elegant and detailed, while still cartoony) and Jordie Bellaire's sensational colour work (a striking mix of deep reds, greys and slime greens) that really makes this book sing.

It's a genuinely beautiful comic, and the ideal jumping-on point for those new to Diana's adventures. While the mainstream *Wonder Woman* comic is currently one of DC's strongest ongoing titles, this has the potential to be even better. An Absolute treat.

Will Salmon

i Three more Absolute comics are on the way soon: *Absolute Flash*, *Green Lantern* and *Martian Manhunter* launch in March.

MYSTIQUE

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer/artist **Declan Shalvey**

ISSUES 1-3 **As Mystique and** Destiny finally tied the knot at the end of the X-Men's Krakoan Age, it's frustratingly inevitable that the new From The Ashes era finds them separated, if not estranged.

Declan Shalvey imbues this excellent five-parter with an intriguing spy-fi sheen. Raven plays an enthralling cat and mouse game with Nick Fury Jr and SHIELD as she attempts to track down her missing spouse, who it turns out is in the custody of the now much-reduced espionage agency.

With the shapeshifting Mystique able to take on a diverse range of guises, from Maverick to Magneto and Colossus, it can sometimes be difficult to pin down her actual character. Elsewhere, while tensions run high between Fury and his boss Maria Hill, there's a refreshing tenderness between him and his father, Nick Fury Sr.

Harking back to Mystique and Destiny's days in the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, there are some pleasing appearances by their former teammates Pyro and Avalanche, while Shalvey's fluid figurework channels Dave Cockrum and John Byrne's classic *Uncanny X-Men* art.

The narrative is slightly disrupted by an unnecessary crossover with the current *Sentinels* series in issue three. Let's hope Shalvey returns to Mystique soon, but next time brings Destiny along for the ride.

Stephen Jewell

DOCTOR WHO: MOST WANTED

The Running Woman

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Running time **214 minutes**
Format **CD/download**
Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **January 2020's** "Fugitive Of The Judoon" introduced Jo Martin as the Fugitive Doctor, a previously unseen version of the Doctor on the run from secretive Time Lord organisation Division. Five years later, this three-story set allows us to learn a little more about her life in-between working for Division and hiding out on Earth.

Opener "Fast Times" sets the scene, with Division calling in the Doctor after noting that she is "showing signs of recall" – something that must not be allowed to happen. She quickly evades their agent (her former partner) before being captured and then escaping again, this time joined by rebel soldier Fade, herself on the run from the Daleks. What follows is a game of "time tag" loosely inspired by 1965's "The Chase", as the pair lead the Daleks through pivotal points in Earth's history. The story has some fun moments and characters, but lacks depth.

"The Legend Of Baba Yaga" is a more interesting tale, as the Doctor enters Russian folklore (long story...) to aid young Vasilisa in her search for a flame that will help her family survive the winter, while avoiding being eaten by the terrifying witch figure. The story's full of twists, turns and revelations about the reality of the myth. It's a little dispiriting to see the propagation of the evil stepmother/sister stereotype, but that's a minor note regarding an otherwise clever tale.

Final story "The Dimension Of Lost Things" is less successful. It's set in the eponymous dimension, with the Doctor hoping to find her lost memories while meeting other "lost" people and souls. It's an interesting idea but not that interesting as a story, despite the tricksy introduction of a second Fugitive Doctor from a year in our Doc's future.

Having two versions of the same character is a hard thing to make work in audio, with little to distinguish between them, and it gets confusing at times. British explorer Sandy Irvine ("lost" on Everest) is a fun addition though.

Throughout all three stories, the Doctor is pursued by Time Lord enforcer/detective Cosmogon (Alice Krige). Unfortunately there's not much to the character, despite the calibre of actor playing her and the producers' intentions that there be almost a Doctor/companion relationship between the two. Maybe she'll get more interesting in future stories?

Rhian Drinkwater

i Chris Chibnall says his touchstones for the character of the Fugitive Doctor were *The Prisoner*, *Lost* and *Twin Peaks*.

ALIEN: ROGUE INCURSION

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **PSVR 2**
Also on **PCVR, Quest 3**
Publisher **Survios**

VIDEOGAME **A VR experience** that aims to sit somewhere between the tension of *Alien Isolation* and the action of *Aliens* sounds great, and it is... at first. *Rogue Incursion* features superb graphics, manual reload mechanics that actually work, and a synth companion that for some reason wears a pair of glasses. You get a pulse rifle and a motion tracker, and the xenomorphs look, sound and move exactly as they should. It initially feels satisfyingly *Alien*.

As you scavenge ammo and interact with terminals to open up ways forward, you're regularly interrupted by alien attacks. A little *too* regularly. It soon becomes apparent that the game spits out enemies every few minutes or so regardless of what you're doing or where you are, which destroys the illusion of intelligence. Xenomorphs are reduced to irritations when you're trying to work out where to go next, an only occasional but guaranteed problem thanks to the ineffective map and waypoints that are sometimes entirely inaccurate.

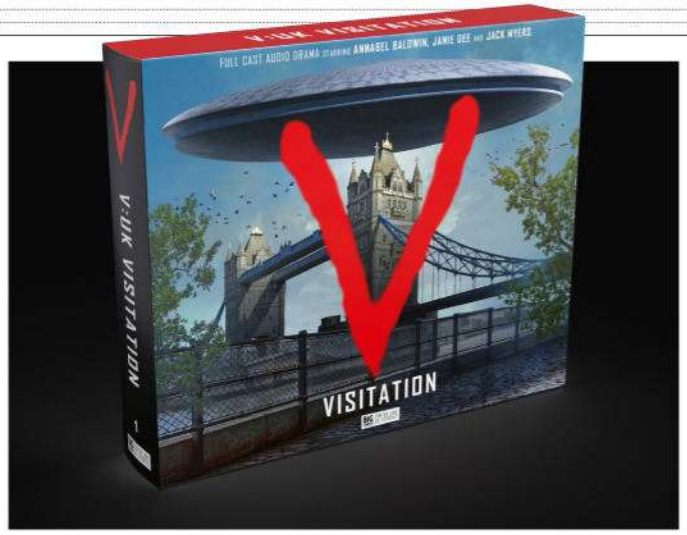
There are some excellent set-pieces, but overly vague instructions and too much backtracking keep poking holes in the atmosphere. And should you die, the game's reliance on save rooms means that you'll probably lose a frustrating amount of progress. Pay full price for this, and you'll feel (ahem) Ripleyed off. **Luke Kemp**

V: UK – VISITATION

Lock up your guinea pigs

★★★★½

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **165 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**



AUDIO DRAMA **Thanks to a** contractual quirk which means that creator Kenneth Johnson has the rights to any *V* remake so long as it's not for TV, Big Finish has updated and relocated the early–'80s smash hit alien invasion miniseries for a massively fun full-cast audio drama.

In case you weren't around for the original phenomenon, *V* was an anti-fascist parable in sci-fi clothing, featuring seemingly benign aliens offering humanity the benefits of their advanced tech, while secretly planning something much nastier for us, and slowly turning Earth into a police state. While the threat was global the series was set in LA, where a plucky human resistance force began the fight back.

This new version is set in the UK, but it's not a case of "Meanwhile, in London...". This is the original story retold and retooled for a post-Covid, fake news era. And it works remarkably well. The totalitarian themes are timeless, but the script cleverly updates the plot to make it feel fresh and relevant.

This being Big Finish, the writers also can't help adding a few in-jokes, including one explaining why the Visitors are no longer greeted by the *Star Wars* theme. Admittedly, without those brain-searing visuals of miles-wide flying saucers hovering over famous landmarks, *V* does lose a great deal of cultural impact, but that means that the story has to work harder to engage you, and *V: UK* manages that splendidly.

> **"The original story retold and retooled for a post-Covid era"**

It's fast-paced, edgy and compelling, with great performances and some of the slickest production Big Finish has ever achieved. And yes, a guinea pig is devoured – noisily. The only real issue is that it doesn't build to much of a climax, just a rather timid cliffhanger. More volumes are planned (with a second due in August), but it's a shame such an accomplished project doesn't end on a bigger high. **Dave Golder**

i The Visitors in this version have seen *Independence Day*, a film that copied a lot of the miniseries' visual iconography.

INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

Belongs in a museum

★★★★½

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PC**
- Also on **Xbox Series X|S (PS5 due this Spring)**
- Publisher **Bethesda Softworks**

Whipping Nazis is always fun. Er, if you get our drift.

VIDEOGAME **So struck are we by** wandering through a lush jungle in first-person, that it's not until Barranca tries to draw his pistol on the titular treasure hunter, and it's whipped out of his hands by a perfect recreation of an era-appropriate Harrison Ford that we realise: we've seen this before.

Indiana Jones And The Great Circle opens with an adaptation of *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*'s iconic intro, which becomes both a mission statement and a chance to show off. Here, we really do feel like Indiana Jones.

From there, you're off on an original quest that fits neatly after *Raiders*, as Indy tracks down a stolen cat mummy and unravels a grand religious conspiracy. Yet the flavour remains full throughout this new adventure.

Whether it's the frequent (and genuinely funny) slapstick asides, or "Aha!" moments of puzzle-solving right before a tomb starts to collapse, it all feels authentically Indy – more so than even the recent movies.

A tip of the fedora must go to voice actor Troy Baker, who nails Harrison Ford's register while being creative enough to add his own spin; his take successfully captures the feeling of hearing original Indy, rather than feeling like a caricature.

The whole game nails that feeling, from bust-ups with Nazis using improvised melee weapons (from saucepans to acoustic guitars), to donning disguises to, say, sneaking through a dig site undiscovered. Stealth is nicely taxing without being too controller-hurtlingly difficult.

The main missions are breezy enough for a cinematic adventure if you want, while also providing dense areas full of additional tombs to scratch that explorer itch. No matter what approach you take though, it always feels like Indiana Jones.

Oscar Taylor-Kent

i In Marshall College, a poster for a Grand Dance mentions "music by Willie Scott" – the singer from *Temple Of Doom*.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

CAPTAIN AMERICA

How much do you know about Marvel's star-spangled shield-slinger?

Quizmaster **Nick Setchfield, Editor at Large**

QUESTION 1
One of the creators of Captain America was legendary artist Jack Kirby. Who was the other?

QUESTION 2
What was the name of the secret program behind Cap's creation?

QUESTION 3
Abraham Erskine invented the super soldier serum, but what was his original name in the comics?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Which artist drew this alternate universe Cap?

QUESTION 5
Who is Cap depicted punching out on the cover of 1941's *Captain America* issue one?

QUESTION 6
Cap's shield is made from an alloy of which fabled metals in the Marvel Universe?

QUESTION 7
Name the villain in Republic Pictures' 1944 *Captain America* serial: a) Phantom Spider b) the Scarab c) the Eel.

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Name the actor behind the mask.

QUESTION 9
In the comics, Sam Wilson has a trained falcon as a sidekick. What's the name of the bird?

QUESTION 10
In 1964, a long-frozen Cap thawed out in issue four of which Marvel title?

QUESTION 11
The star of 1990's *Captain America* movie was the son of which acclaimed American novelist?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify this wartime enemy, who went on to command terror organisation Hydra.

QUESTION 13
In 1974, disillusioned by the state of the nation, Cap took on a new identity. What was it?

QUESTION 14
In which Marvel movie did Anthony Mackie make his debut as Sam Wilson?

QUESTION 15
Altogether, how many times has Chris Evans played Steve Rogers in the Marvel Cinematic Universe? Don't forget all those uncredited cameos, now...

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Name this WWII-era superteam.

QUESTION 17
What jet-powered vehicle did Cap use in two made-for-TV movies in the '70s?

QUESTION 18
In 1976 Jack Kirby created a story to mark 200 years of American independence. Name it.

QUESTION 19
In the '60s, Cap shared the comic book *Tales Of Suspense* with which other Marvel hero?

QUESTION 20
Captain America issue 25 was 2007's best-selling comic. What shattering event happened in it?

Answers
1 Joe Simon 2 Project Rebirth 3 Reinstein 4 Bryan Hitch 5 Adolf Hitler 6 Vibranium and Adamantium 7 b) the Scarab 8 Hugo Weaving 9 Redwing 10 *The Avengers* 11 JD Salinger 12 Baron Strucker 13 Nomad 14 *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* 15 11 16 The Invaders 17 A motorbike 18 *Captain America's Bicentennial Battles* 19 Iron Man 20 Cap was assassinated

How did you do?

Rate yourself by state size

0-5
Rhode Island

6-10
South Carolina

11-15
Illinois

16-19
Wyoming

20
Alaska

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE FINAL COUNTDOWN...?
THE WHEEL OF TIME
ON SET FOR SEASON THREE IN SOUTH AFRICA

THE ELECTRIC STATE
THE RUSSO BROTHERS ARE BACK

SNOW WHITE
THE APPLE'S ROTTEN RIGHT TO THE CORE

PLUS! VAMPIRES! LIZARDS! WITCHES!

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All contents are subject to change, we'll just say it's "timey wimey"

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SFX

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"Shut up 7-Zark-7"

ipso. Regulated

Widely Recycled

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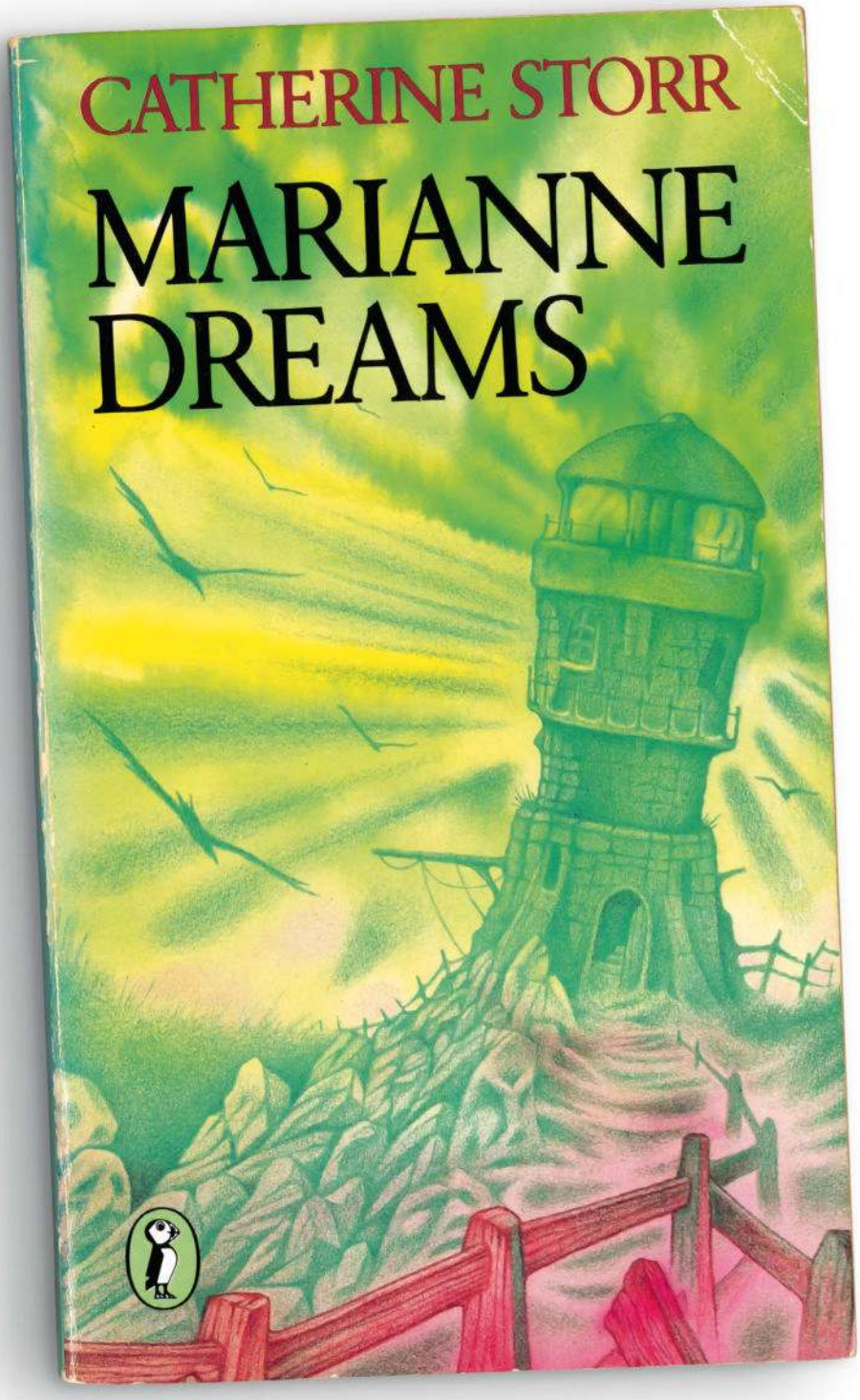

Marianne Dreams

Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

Though first published in 1958, Catherine Storr's spooky children's book continued to fascinate young readers like me in the '80s.

Its 10-year-old heroine is confined to bed for several months due to illness. Attempting to entertain herself, she draws a picture of a house with a pencil found in her mother's sewing box. In her dreams, she then finds herself inside the house – where she meets Mark, a sickly boy unable to walk, who has no idea how he got there. On waking, Marianne learns that her tutor is also teaching a boy called Mark, bed-ridden due to polio.

From then on, the two keep meeting in the dream house. And as long as she draws with *the* pencil (which can't be erased) Marianne is able to add more items, such as furniture, endlessly replenishing roast chickens, and an exercise bike to help Mark recover his strength.

The eeriest element is introduced when, in a tantrum, Marianne draws eyes on seven standing stones around the house (just one big peeper each). The resulting monocular "Watchers" (referred to as THEY and THEM – which lands rather differently in the era of declaring your pronouns...) soon menacingly crowd around the building. In chapter 15, Marianne draws a radio, but the only "station" it can receive is a broadcast of the thoughts of these ominous beings. Their psychic cries of "Get them!" chilled me to the bone.

The way the children talk is very of its time. If – as an adult reader – you used occurrences of the words "jolly", "beastly" and "frightfully" as the basis for a drinking game, you'd need an ambulance after a couple of chapters. But the characterisation is convincing, particularly the breathless manner in which the two speak when agitated.

Both the screen adaptations are decent too. First came 1972's *Escape Into Night*, a six-part serial which only survives in black and white. The kids' quarrelling gets rather tiresome, but the Watchers are effectively creepy: in a neat touch, their single, glowing eyes also turn into TV screens showing the objects of their attentions.

I have a soft spot for the 1988 film *Paperhouse* too, despite significant changes: its Marianne is much less well behaved, and the threat is a hammer-wielding version of her absent father. But those baleful stones with their "fixed, unwinking gaze" and "savage roar of fear and hate" can't be beaten, which is why I still treasure my 1984 Puffin edition.

Ian would have drawn pizza and Doctor Who VHSes.

Fact Attack!

- When she wrote the book, Catherine Storr was working as a psychotherapist in the outpatients' department of Middlesex Hospital.
- At that time, the writer was married to Anthony Storr, a psychiatrist who wrote books such as *Sexual Deviation* and *Human Aggression*.
- Storr wrote a sequel, 1960's *Marianne And Mark*, in which the now 15-year-old heroine meets her dream pal while on holiday in Brighton.
- Before her death in 2001, the author also wrote the libretto for an opera version of the book. It was first performed in 2004.
- The screenwriter of *Paperhouse* was Matthew Jacobs, best known to *Doctor Who* fans for the 1996 TV movie starring Paul McGann.

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